Dungeon Keeper Ami [Sailor Moon / Dungeon Keeper] [Story Only Thread]

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Dungeon Keeper Ami by Pusakuronu

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Dungeon Keeper Ami (DARK)

Originally on 2009-09-16T18:51:00

The Horned Reaper looked down at the prone form of the his potential get-out-of-jail-free ticket. A female, judging from the skirt and the oh-so-cutesy ribbons. His eyebrows narrowed at the sight. Urge to kill rising. The human was so short that he doubted she was even fully-grown. Most disappointing. Too physically weak to put up an entertaining fight, and too young to have absorbed much magical lore. Unless she wasn't human. She looked the part, but he had never seen one with blue hair before. Then again, most of the ones he had encountered were either wearing helmets or coated with various bodily fluids. Oh well. All he really needed was an escape route; future carnage and mayhem were merely a bonus.

Noting the length of the girl's skirt, or rather the lack thereof, the demon nodded approvingly. No self-respecting heroine would be caught dead in an outfit like that. The Reaper's clawed fingers tightened around his scythe grip as he yearned to drive it into the smooth, unblemished skin of her legs. No! Focus! Freedom first, fun later! Dressed like this, the intruder had to be an apprentice dark sorceress then, or maybe some lord's pampered plaything. Neither would object strongly to being handed power on a silver platter. Getting her to play along should be simple. Even better, she was already waking up and wouldn't test his patience unduly. The Reaper's perpetual grin widened in anticipation.

Ami Mizuno, currently Sailor Mercury, let out a soft groan as she woke. She was lying on her stomach, and, judging from the way her ribs, side, and face ached, had landed that way, possibly head-first. Feeling cold, rough stone under her left cheek, she raised her head off the ground. There was a stinging sensation and a slight resistance as coagulating blood stuck to the floor. Deep blue eyes opened and stared unseeing into the darkness. Ami could hear dripping noises echoing in the distance, and the cold air smelled of mould and a hint of sulphur. Where was she, and how did she get here?

Oh, right. Jadeite's latest scheme had involved more pocket dimensional weirdness, and she had been just about to follow Sailor Moon and Sailor Mars through the exit, while behind her space was just folding up and collapsing. The realisation that she had not made it in time hit like a physical blow, and she felt her heartbeat speed up. Was she in the Dark Kingdom? Dead? Being dead probably didn't hurt this much.

Groggily, her right hand went up to her earrings, prompting a visor to slide in place in front of her eyes. Grey tones replaced pitch blackness, and Sailor Mercury got a first glimpse of her surroundings. Still shaken, she noted that the floor was rather dusty. Further inspection was postponed by the discovery of two - were those hooves? - nearly as thick as her torso, located just barely out of arms reach. Involuntarily, her gaze wandered upward, taking in the wide greaves that flared out into pointed knee protectors, the red skinned legs like tree-trunks, the metal-studded loincloth, a barrel-shaped muscular chest, and finally came to rest on a grin that was nothing but finger-long fangs. The part of Ami's brain that wasn't gibbering in terror admitted that she might have been a bit hasty in ruling out the "dead" hypothesis. This horned monster sure did look like a Western illustration of the devil, though she couldn't imagine what she had done to end up in hell. These unproductive thoughts were roughly shoved aside by self-preservation instincts kicking in.

Eyes widening, a shout of "Youma!" escaped the blue-haired girl's lips, and she quickly rolled away from the looming monstrosity, jumping to her feet once out of reach of that grisly-looking scythe. Thoughts were racing through her brain even as she took a combat stance. *Giant youma, I'm all alone, I don't know where I am. Options? Shabon Spray won't hurt it. Beat it up? It's twice as big as me, and all muscle! I wish I had Rei's powers!* By now, fear was threatening to overcome the adrenaline burning in her veins. *Flee?*

The Reaper adjusted his opinion of the girl slightly upward when, confronted with the sight of him, she didn't freeze up, but instead scrambled out of reach and even looked as if she considered attacking him. How interesting.

"Shabon... "

Even better, she was starting some kind of spell now. He shifted his weight, bracing himself. This should be fun!

"Spray!"

Bubbles? BUBBLES?! His right eyebrow started to twitch as his expectations came crashing down around him, and a deep growl escaped his throat. What kind of moron threw bubbles at a horned reaper? He had never been insulted like thi- wait, it was getting rather chilly, and this fog hadn't been there before. The murk was so thick he couldn't even see his own feet, and the brat had disappeared. The muffled sound of rapidly fading footsteps indicated that she was running away rather quickly. The Reaper sniffed the air. This blasted fog masked even the scent of her fear. How vexing. The dungeon was small though, so he could just stand here, talk, and try to coax her into coming back. That would be the reasonable thing to do.

Ami shivered when she heard the thundering clang of the youma's hooves stomping down the corridor. It was cackling madly as it followed her. She had hoped the only exit from the bleak main chamber would lead her to some place where she could hide, but instead she found a tiny cell filled with rotten straw. The prison's rusted bars were bent outwards, and some had even been broken and ejected into the corridor itself, as if something huge had violently burst out. She had a fairly good idea what.

Fingers flying rapidly over the keyboard of her hand-held Mercury computer, the senshi searched for a solution. She had scanned the walls and found them solid. No secret doors anywhere in sight, nor any trace of life. Oh, she had seen some dead cockroaches and rat skeletons. All neatly bisected. This youma was certifiably insane! Unimpeded by her own fog, she could already see the towering figure approaching. Her computer was steadfastly refusing to find any exploitable weaknesses. Her lips became a thin line as her face settled in a mask of determination. If she was to die here, she would not go down without a fight.

The Reaper snorted with irritation, this damnable fog was an annoyance. At least the brat was trapped in this dead end - what was that? Catching a hint of movement from the corner of his eye,

he whirled around, or at least attempted to. Something cold and metallic struck the hollow of his right knee, and the leg he was twirling around on buckled. The ground shook as his armoured knees struck the ground. Behind him, a slight shape raised her broken prison bar again, this time in an overhead blow. You can't kill her yet, the red demon reminded himself.

Quick like a snake, his right hand shot out, catching his attacker by the throat. Sailor Mercury made a strangled noise as red, scaled fingers closed around her neck like a vice. The Reaper stood up, incidentally lifting the girl off the ground. Merciless yellow eyes stared into fear widened blue ones, which narrowed in anger. Then she brought the heavy metal bar straight down on his head. More startled than hurt, he let out a grunt and blinked. Seeing the expression of shock and growing despair on his victims face, he let out a long, roaring laugh. Small gloved fingers clawing at his hand snapped him out of it. The brat's face was turning a rather unhealthy shade of blue by now.

"Listen," the demon growled, bringing Ami's face up to his own. "I will drop you now, and you will stay and listen. If you run again, I'll chop your feet off!"

Seeing that the girl was in no shape to reply, he dropped her unceremoniously to the floor, and watched in amusement as she backed away, crawling until her back was to the wall, wheezing and gasping for air all the while.

Ami could see lights dance before her eyes, and massaged her neck with both hands, trying to loosen her choker that was now nearly embedded in her skin. So much for the ambush idea. If the youma wanted to talk while she eagerly sucked in air, that was all right. As long as it talked, it wasn't killing her. Maybe she should start paying attention.

"...as you can see, we are both trapped here. Fortunately for both of us, there is a way out now that you are here. One that you will find quite to your liking, I reckon." the Reaper looked down at the girl, looking for a reaction. Nothing, she was still coughing. Stupid, fragile humans.

Well, that explains why I'm still alive, Ami thought.

"Just claim the Dungeon Heart for yourself and become a Keeper!"

And unleash you on the world, the senshi added in her mind. Ack, neck hurts. Better keep him talking. "What is a 'Keeper'?" she croaked out, still rubbing her raw throat.

"A Keeper is one of the ruler of the underworld, commanding vast armies and magics beyond mortal ken, more powerful and wealthy than even kings! Even the mightiest of monsters would bow to your will. Perhaps even me, if you do well. Do you accept?"

This youma wants me to become a Dark General, Sailor Mercury thought incredulously. A mental image of herself in an uniform just like Jadeite's flashed through her mind. Ridiculous. Still, I had better not upset him. "Where is this ... dungeon heart ... you mentioned, and what would I have to do?" she craned her neck back, looking up at the Reaper for the first time since their fight.

Hook, line, sinker, the demon thought. "You landed on it, actually. With my help, the process is rather simple. All you need is to want the job and some blood, I will handle the rest."

Ami pulled herself to her feet, steadying herself against the clammy wall. This dungeon heart sounded like her best bet to get out of here. If only it didn't mean letting the scary monster out too. She needed more time. Cautiously, she asked "Please don't take this personally, but would you mind if I analysed this dungeon heart before I committed to anything? It sounds too good to be true, and..."

The Reaper chuckled, amused. He had not told her any lies, so what could it hurt? After waiting for decades, waiting a bit more did not mean much to him. "Paranoia? Useful in this business. Go right ahead." he waved a hand dismissively, getting another chuckle out of the way she nearly tripped over her own feet in her hurry to get away from him, looking back over her shoulder nervously from time to time.

Two hours later, he was rather bored. What did the girl hope to learn

from staring at the round cover of the dungeon heart with those weird glasses of hers and tapping her fingers on a small rectangle?

Ami was rather intrigued by the readout of her scans. If it wasn't for the youma glaring in her direction, then attempting to analyse an artefact of this complexity would have been downright enjoyable. Thus, she had been working on a plan to get rid of it for the last hour. Or, to be more honest, trying to convince herself to go through with it. The device underneath the protective stone plate was of a fiendishly elaborate design, but she was certain that she could manage to manipulate it to her ends, given enough time - without making a deal with the devil over there. For now, she already knew how to access that reservoir of magical power slumbering within the inert heart. With it, she could boost her own attack enough to dispose of this youma. She hoped.

All she had to do was step on this symbol first, then walk over to that on the other side, concentrate, take position over the centre-most part of the dungeon heart... like this... Ami closed her eyes and took a deep breath to calm down her nerves while sweat trickled down her forehead. The reaper was still standing in the same place, leaning against the wall with a bored expression on its face, but an eyebrow was rising at her sudden activity. The senshi exhaled. She'd only get one try at this. Now or never.

"Shabon Spray..." she felt a rush of power flow into her from below, and tried to ignore the tainted feel of it. She felt bloated with energy, close to exploding. Then, a dam she never knew was there burst under the pressure "... Freezing!"

Ice! Why did it have to be ice! He'd kill that treacherous little slut as soon as he got out of this ice block. Which, given ambient temperatures, could take a while. The Reaper would have roared in homicidal anger, had he been able to move. Alas, he was well and truly immobilised, and only his hate-filled eyes were able to dart around in their sockets. His attacker was having some trouble too it seemed, floating in a pillar of blue light and screaming herself hoarse. Served her right. He just hoped she hadn't killed herself and deprived him of the pleasure.

The dungeon heart, while not being sentient, reacted according to its

programming when it felt itself being accessed. User is intending to use my power to destroy her enemies? Check. User's blood? On the cover, coagulated but present. Check. Strong source of magical power? Oh hell yes! Check.

The Reaper was fairly certain that a flower bud growing out of the potential Keeper's forehead was not part of the usual activation sequence. How embarrassing. He would have frowned had his eyebrows not been frozen in place. And now the plant blossomed out, only to reveal a brightly glowing blue crystal inside. As if pulled by a great force, it abruptly shot downward, breaking right through the dungeon heart's cover, and sending chips of stone flying. Moments later, the whole stone disc fractured and exploded upward, flinging the girl away like a rag doll. A first deep, rumbling heartbeat echoed through the halls, oh so familiar to the trapped demon. Unable to move, he watched as the dungeon heart's superstructure started to form and torches magically ignited themselves, bringing light back to the dungeon for the first time in centuries.

Last edited: Jul 9, 2016

Just how does any of this work?

Originally on 2009-09-10T19:38:00

Ami woke up, covered in dust and draped uncomfortably over a piece of rubble that was pressing into her belly. With a start, she remembered that she had been attacking that big scythe-wielding youma before passing out. Given that she was still in one piece, her desperate plan must have worked, even if it had partially backfired on her. She noted that someone must have turned on the lights while she was out. Lying near one wall, she could only see a corner of the room. The view offered little to hold her attention, despite the murals now visible in the flickering torchlight. Their vaguely female silhouettes reminded her uncomfortably of the various Dark Kingdom youma she had encountered.

Ami heard a high-pitched noise, somewhere between laughter and a snicker, and realised she had no time to waste on admiring the architecture. Groaning, she pulled herself to her knees. The act of getting to her feet was hampered by the surprising stiffness of her joints, but at least she seemed uninjured. Absently brushing some dust and gravel off her short blue skirt, she looked about for the source of the sound.

Immediately, a raised dais, supporting three vaulting arches arranged in a triangle pattern around a circular pit drew her attention. The structure took up most of the room, and certainly hadn't been there before. Her lips formed an 'o' of surprise. Just how long had she been unconscious this time around? Judging from the pool of melt water surrounding the ice-encased form of the scythe-wielding youma, several hours at least. The visor still covering her eyes flared to life when she focused on the red figure. The readouts dancing across the screen left no doubt that the creature was still alive, and, as far as Ami could tell, its burning yellow eyes were following her every move. She shuddered. What did it take to bring that monster down?

She briefly pondered freezing it again, just to be on the safe side,

when another squeal reminded her that she might have more immediate problems. Following the sound, she approached the dais taking up the centre of the room, and peered around the corner. On that side, a set of stairs led up to the arching superstructure looming above. She decided to cautiously approach them, and took a step forward. Unexpectedly, her foot encountered something soft that let out a shriek of protest.

"Gah!" Sailor Mercury jumped back, bringing her left hand up in a warding gesture as she looked down. A tiny figure, no bigger than a child, was lying on the ground, with its face buried in a heap of debris that Ami recognised as having belonged to the dungeon heart's cover. The creature flailed its arms up and down, striking at the ground repeatedly in order to extricate itself from the mound. The senshi felt a tinge of guilt when she noticed the dusty footprint standing out prominently against the green-tinged skin on the back of the being's bald head. Its clumsy struggles reminded her a bit of Usagi.

Any resemblance to the blonde klutz faded away when the creature finally managed to remove its over-sized head from the dirt, stood up, and faced her with an angry chirp. Ami stared down. Fist-sized black orbs set in a gaunt, near skeletal face stared up. Upon meeting her eyes, the thing's furious snarl relaxed into a blank expression. Ami's face mirrored the expression, and both remained unmoving for a few seconds. Then, tentatively, the imp's upper lip twitched upward into a cautious smile, revealing a mouth full of broad, jutting teeth.

Ami was out of her depth. Horrible monsters that snarled furiously and attacked? She knew how to deal with that. A youma that smiled and seemed more afraid of her than she of it? Completely new situation. Therefore, she could be forgiven for not returning the smile and keeping her face blank and unmoving as she continued staring down at it, wondering what part of her youma-fighting experience was applicable here. The imp seemed to interpret this as a bad sign and curled up in a ball, covering its face with its arms.

At this point, the blue-haired girl became aware of sniggering from above. Her head whipped around, and she spotted three more creatures just like the one in front of her, looking down from behind

the low stone railing around the pit, and seeming unduly amused at the fate of their companion. When they noticed that she had spotted them, they ducked into cover again. Ami thought she heard something that sounded suspiciously like "Uh-oh." She heard a pitter-patter noise, when the creature near her made good use of the distraction and went to hide.

Ami went into active scanning mode to discover just how many of the bug-eyed creatures were hiding in that pit. Almost immediately, the screen all but screamed warnings at her. A torrent of evil energy was pouring into her, originating from deep within the pit. The information made her legs go weak with worry for a moment, but she didn't feel as if anything was wrong. *Yet,* a nagging little voice in her mind added. Ignoring the warning, as she couldn't do anything about it, she continued her investigation. Four more tendrils of dark power reached outward, tiny in comparison to her own. They had to connect to these small creatures, she concluded. Interestingly, no connection went to Big Red in his ice block.

"Hello? I know you are here! Show yourselves!" Sailor Mercury stopped at the top stair, getting a good view of the pit's interior for the first time. She didn't know whether the little ones could understand her, or would heed her request, much less what she'd do if they did, but she felt like she needed to gain control of the situation somehow. To her surprise, the things hopped out almost immediately, and formed up in a row in front of her. Despite their demeanour - one was putting a finger in its ear and twirling it around, another was hopping from one foot to the other, a third was licking its mining pick - she still got the impression that they were standing at attention. She noted that each one had the same equipment: an appropriately sized pick and a big bag slung over its shoulder.

"Can you understand me?"

Four affirmative nods, completely out of synch with each other.

Ami, encouraged by their cooperation, continued her questioning "Can you talk?"

This time, the heads shook from left to right.

"Too bad. How many of you are there, total?"

One of the creatures held up four fingers. It needed two hands to do so, as each one had only three fingers.

Ami nodded to herself. That matched what her visor told her about the power flows. "Are you planning to attack me at some point?" a bit of a stupid question that, as they'd just lie if they really were hostile. Nevertheless, she hoped that she could learn something from their reaction.

The expression on the creatures' faces ranged from perplexed to a look that very eloquently asked "Are you stupid?" Accompanied by frantic head-shaking, this was about as definite an answer as she could hope to get. Interrogating the creatures about a way out of this place proved fruitless, and she couldn't think of any more questions to ask them right now. So she thanked them for their time and bowed politely - which drew a round of confused looks, for some reason - and proceeded with the inspection of the chamber.

Stepping up close to the circular pit, she got her first good look into its depths. Sickly green motes of light swirled around above a red, fleshy-looking membrane that pulsed rhythmically, producing a rumbling sound like a beating heart. This is obviously the fabled dungeon heart, Ami thought, realising with a start that she had not noticed its omnipresent noise before now. It had always been there, but felt natural, just the way things should be. Ominous. When her own heartbeat sped up, so did the beating of the magical device. Ami frowned. Could she have claimed the heart accidentally? Was that even possible? Had this been the youma's plan from the start? She shot a glare at the dripping pillar of ice, deeply disturbed by that possibility. She didn't know enough, hadn't known enough since coming here, and doubt was gnawing at her.

Taking a deep breath, the girl sat down on the edge of the dais, letting her legs dangle freely. The four little creatures were *probably* not going to be a problem - they had had opportunity enough to do whatever they wanted to her while she was unconscious. She needed to calm down, learn more, study the dungeon heart and finding a way home to her friends. Now that she wasn't in immediate danger, she pulled out her Mercury computer in order to properly

analyse her options. The pool of power she had tapped to defeat the Reaper was replenishing itself, apparently by sucking in ambient power from the dungeon. It was already half full again, and she quickly put it to good use by re-freezing the red demon. Thankfully without any side effects this time.

After some time of focused typing away at her palmtop, Ami was starting to feel hungry. She had been here for several hours now, without a single bite to eat. So far, she didn't have a clue on how to coax the dungeon heart into sending herself back home (or if it even could), so food would become a problem. Drink not so much, she could create water herself. She knew that there was no food to be found anywhere here in the dungeon. She didn't know how she knew, but she was nevertheless convinced that this was true. More importantly, what could she do about it? Her gaze wandered over to where one of the gnome-things was wiggling its bottom at the frozen Reaper, blowing raspberries, and generally trying to goad the hapless demon into a homicidal rage. Entirely redundant effort, in her opinion.

Back to the food problem. Wasn't there anything in here she could eat? Her gaze fell on the deep-frosted Reaper. Naaahhh. Where had that idea come from? Not only was it disgusting, she also had no idea how to kill that youma, and it would probably turn into dust anyway. Yet, the analytical part of her mind would not let go of an idea until it had completely thought it through. Her gaze drifted lower, to the little green thing. Maybe it was edible? The imp stopped what it was doing and turned to look at her suspiciously. Maybe if a limb was separated while it was still living? The midget-sized monster's expression turned into one of pure horror, and then the critter ran off as fast as its short legs could carry it, while letting out a shrill wail.

Ami froze, palmtop dropping into her lap. The being could read her thoughts? Experimentally, she turned her attention to one of the others, wishing for it to come closer. It did so, almost at once, and stared up at her expectantly. She mentally ordered it to hop on one leg. Immediate obedience, accompanied by a look that was part confusion, part annoyance. She imagined it doing a handstand. With great reluctance, the less than agile creature gave it its best attempt.

The imp managed to get its feet in the air all right, but then its pack dropped to the ground, upsetting its balance, and both went tumbling off the dais. Ami watched this, wide-eyed, scratching her temple with one finger in embarrassment.

Experiment successful, more or less. Maybe it had something to do with their mutual connections to the dungeon heart? The scary youma had told her that Keepers were rulers of the Underworld, which fit seamlessly into the bigger picture. Unfortunately, it also was another indication that she had unwittingly stumbled into accepting the role. In any case, it appeared as if she had a bunch of loyal slave workers now. Her expression turned sour at the notion. Even if they were youma, the idea of completely controlling someone else did not sit well with her. She had better find a way to fix all of this.

Her progress so far indicated that the dungeon heart needed precious materials for some of its advanced functions. Whether they were used as a catalyst, or used to pay other entities was still a mystery to her. She took off her tiara, holding the thin gold ornament with a single blue gem in her hands, and looking at it. Maybe she could use this? If she did, would it be gone next time she transformed? Putting the ornament back on her forehead, she continued her attempts to discover the mysteries of the dungeon heart.

Last edited: Jul 3, 2016

A Deal with the Devil (DARK)

Originally on 2009-09-13T00:13:00

Distorted by a thick layer of ice, the Horned Reaper saw the four dwarf-sized forms of the imps approach his prison. He couldn't bend his neck to look down, so he lost sight of the impertinent things when they arrived at the foot of his icy prison. Moments later, his field of vision swung downwards abruptly as the block containing him toppled over and hit the floor with a clang. The vaulted ceiling was no improvement over seeing that blue-haired fool of a Keeper fumbling around without a clue, but at least it was less likely to infuriate him further.

The change of perspective didn't last. Almost at once, the world started spinning around him rapidly when his prison started rolling down the only corridor leading away from the Heart chamber. On each full rotation, he could make out the giggling forms of the imps, gleefully pushing his prison forward with a combined exertion of strength. Oh, the indignity of it all. He wasn't some kind of room ornament that could be unceremoniously discarded when one got tired of it! The motion stopped, leaving him trapped like a fly in amber within a thick layer of ice, and staring down at rotten straw.

The Reaper simmered with rage, nearly literally so. He was a demon with an affinity for fire, and while he much preferred his scythe, he could unleash a fireball in a pinch. Or would have been able to, had the ice not prevented him from going through the necessary motions. In any case, his body exuded enough heat to make the ice around him melt, slowly. Sure, the damned brat of a sorceress applied a new layer from time to time, but that was all added on the outside. Already, a bubble filled with water, rather than ice, followed the contours of his body. Once he got a bit more elbowroom, he would be able to apply force directly, and then the girl would pay.

Ami covered her mouth with one hand in surprise, watching as the Reaper's prison disappeared into the tunnel with loud clanking noises. The sight of him made her nervous, so she had ordered her

servants to move it to the farthest corner of the dungeon. She had expected them to just slide the ice block there, though. Apparently, the exact details about how to execute a command was left to themselves. She'd have to keep that in mind for later.

She felt tempted to have the little beings use their picks to dig a route to the surface. The lure of sunshine, fresh air, and possibly even people who could help her get home was nearly irresistible. In contrast, this place was dank, empty, and it smelled unpleasant. Not to mention the lack of food and the abysmal company. Unfortunately, she couldn't in good conscience allow the currently frozen youma to reach innocent people. She had the means to fight it off, but that wasn't necessarily true for whoever lived above, and once she left for home, it would be free to do as it pleased. She hoped her friends were all right. Feeling homesick, she wondered if her mother had already returned from work at the hospital and noticed that she was missing.

Right. Dawdling wouldn't solve any of her many problems. She thought she had a good enough grip on the fundamentals of constructing things with the power of the dungeon heart, and the only way to test this theory was to give it a try. She walked over to the wall on the opposite side of the corridor leading away from the dungeon heart, and let her fingers slide over the smoothed bricks. Grey dust stuck to her white-gloved fingertips. Good, it was dry. She needed more space for her construction, and accidentally flooding the chamber just wouldn't do. Something had already told her this on an instinctive level, but she wasn't ready to simply trust information that came seemingly out of nowhere. "All right then. Get to it!"

The imps needed no more encouragement. They attacked the wall as with great enthusiasm, as if it had personally offended them. The tools bit into the stone with an ease that should have been impossible for implements wielded by such slight creatures. Ami took a step back when the bricks collapsed inward and a great cloud of dust billowed up, more than she had expected. A second look revealed that the stone and debris were sublimating rapidly, turning from solids into a fine greyish smoke that rose to the ceiling in fine streams. Frowning, she pulled out her computer and tracked the

phenomenon with her scanner, watching the tendrils make their way through the air and straight toward the dungeon heart, where they swirled down into the pit, never to be seen again. Some form of intrinsic magic catching her unprepared again, then. And here she had wasted half an hour working out the most effective way to store the excavated rubble.

The sounds of collapses and metal striking stone stopped, and her little helpers started squealing excitedly. One of them was writhing on the floor, a long, pale maggot wrapped around it. The head of the snake-like thing was darting back and forth rapidly, its mandibles holding a little chunk of imp flesh every time it rose from the body underneath. Before the senshi could do something, the other imps were already on it, bringing their picks down on the segmented body again and again with wet smacking noises. They hit their hapless companion as often as the target. Ami could feel bile rise in her throat at the sight.

Finally, the overgrown insect stopped twitching, lying in a pool of its own body fluids, and the imps went back to work as if nothing had happened. She looked at the carcass. Eww. It was all whitish and icky and slimy. It was also not turning into dust or dissolving the floor with its blood, which put it into the "potentially edible" category, as the only candidate. Ami gulped. She'd have to be much hungrier than she was now before she'd try giant maggot roasted over open torch. A lot more hungry. A quick attack encased the worm in a glistening layer of ice. For now, it could go into the corner of the Heart chamber she had tentatively labelled "larder".

Meanwhile, the imps were putting the finishing touches on the new extension to the dungeon. Ami could see them smooth the floors and walls with astonishing speed. She closed her mouth. Really, she should be used to such weirdness by now. Interestingly, she could feel a very minor increase in the power flows through the dungeon heart when the servants imbued the ground with its power. She surveyed the new room. Square, as she had intended, with a domed ceiling to better carry the weight of the soil above. The white and black chequerboard pattern of the floor she had not specified, nor the stylized bas-reliefs of chess figures on the walls. A slight smile flickered over her face. They were more to her tastes than the

creepy murals on the old parts of the dungeon, at least.

Now for the more difficult part. She re-checked the plan on her palmtop, painstakingly extracted from the depths of the dungeon heart, and nodded once. The screen displayed a magical pattern that she was reasonably confident would furnish a room from raw materials, if activated by will and magic. Just by watching the arcane symbols, she could feel the word 'library' form in the back of her mind, along with the knowledge of how to bring it out into the world. Another creepy side-effect from accessing the dungeon heart no doubt, but one that was admittedly useful. The library wasn't her first choice, a bedroom (the floor was rather hard) or well-stocked kitchen would have been better, but she just knew she did not have what it took to build them. In contrast, she could sense that most of the resources required for a library were nearby, somewhere outside the dungeon. She had already ordered her minions to dig an exploratory tunnel and fetch them, and they were even now returning with their quarry.

Ami looked at the growing pile of various substances on the ground, while the imps emptied out their bags, adding more to it. With enough gold, she need not have bothered, but aside from her tiara, had none. Hopefully, the feeling that the spell would still work if the right base materials were provided was right. The girl frowned. The feeling called for wood, which she didn't have. She hoped that substituting coal would work. It had been wood at some point, after all. Likewise, no dye was available, and she had sacrificed the bow on the back of her skirt, hoping that the spell would be able to extract the blue dye and use it. Satisfied with the preparations, she stepped out of the room, preceded by the quartet of imps vacating the area in the orderly fashion of frightened chickens.

At Ami's command, the room exploded into a maelstrom of activity. A whirlwind glittering in every colour of the rainbow picked up the assembled materials and spun them around the room, transforming and shaping them as they were flung to the air. From time to time, a piece struck the ground or walls with a loud clang and snapped into place, no longer participating in the violent flurry of transfiguration. Before Ami's eyes, the room assembled itself. First, a charred-looking carpet (probably the coal's fault, she surmised), then desks,

benches, chairs, and rows of shelves - all pure black (the coal again, probably). Finally, the swirling sands melted into glass and formed rows of beakers, alembics, and more enigmatic instruments, taking up a whole corner of the room. The library came with a lab, Ami nodded approvingly. But where were the books? The shelves were empty, as far as she could tell. Nevertheless, both her computer readouts and feeling insisted that the process had worked perfectly fine.

Perplexed, Ami entered the room, looking around to see if she had missed anything. That stupid dungeon heart was not performing as advertised. Rule the underworld? Hah! She got four loyal midgets, and the one youma in here was trying to kill her. Riches? She didn't even have a bed. And now it was even withholding her books. What good was a library without books? She *needed* some source of information to learn more about her situation, and now this spell wasn't cooperating! Had she been a more outspoken person, she would have screamed in frustration.

Her gaze turned to a round object sitting on one of the lab benches when she felt the magic around her react to it. The crystal ball, for it looked as if it had emerged straight from a fortune teller's tent. A glowing white nimbus surrounded it, and fog within was swirling to form a face.

Nicodemus Asbraxe considered himself an adventurous merchant, daring enough to snatch a profit from situations nobody else would touch, and smart enough to turn a blind eye to the less than legal activities of his clients. His customers considered him a pompous, fat fence with too much greed and too little sense of self-preservation. They were wrong about the last point, at least. He had once been apprenticed to a wizard, but found that he was averse to risking life and limb performing experiments in draughty laboratories. Still, he had adapted some of his master's summoning spells to allow for transactions at a distance instead, which proved to be a veritable wellspring of money if you weren't choosy about your customers. Self-preservation also dictated that when a Keeper wanted something, you dropped whatever you were doing and gave them their full attention. Nicodemus *liked* Keepers. They did not ask pointed questions about where a particular object came from, or why

there was blood splattered all over it. More importantly, they were, without fail, filthy rich.

One of the devices in his study alerted him that a Keeper was searching for some unspecified item, and the fence quickly pulled his hood down until his face was hidden in a pool of darkness out of which only a long, mangy beard protruded. He then muttered a well-practised incantation, and a picture formed in the air above his coffee table, showing him the prospective client and part of the dungeon directly behind her. Hmm, cute that one. Female, rather young too, strange blue hair in a short cut, and matching blue eyes with a look of confusion in them. He mentally adjusted his prices up a bit at the sign of inexperience. He also took note of the dark circles around her eyes and the scabbed-over scratch on her left cheek. Exhausted, has been in a fight recently, and is possibly desperate. He nearly rubbed his hands together in glee. Better and better.

"Greetings, Lady Keeper. I am Nicodemus Asbraxe, at your service. To whom do I owe the pleasure of speaking with?" he began, with what he hoped to be a charming tone of voice. The girl seemed to be surprised to hear him speak, if the widening of her blue eyes was any indication. Oh, this would be good. Prices increased another notch. Unexpectedly, she whirled around, facing away from him, a brief look of panic on her face. He could empathise. The sight of a charging Horned Reaper would do that to anyone. Even here, safe in his home, he had gone white as a sheet. Immediately, he cut the connection. If the Reaper was after this Keeper, she was dead meat anyway, and he didn't want the beast to get a look at him. The last thing he needed was it extending whatever its grudge was to him. Sighing, Nicodemus sank deeper into his couch, lamenting the lost opportunity. His last glimpse of the girl through the dissolving picture was of her preparing to unleash some sort of spell.

Oh no! How? How had he gotten loose? Ami was acting on reflex, making the arm movements preceding her signature attack. *Damn, that youma could move fast when he wanted to! But she had noticed him in time, barely.*

"Shabon Spray Freezing!" A swirling spray of freezing bubbles shot from her hands, toward the Reaper. She could have sworn its lips twisted upward into a hideous grin when their eyes met. Then,

quicker than she thought possible, its armoured right hoof swung around in a sweeping kick, catching one of her servants and turning it into a speeding projectile. Halfway the distance between Ami and her enemy, the screaming imp slammed into her own attack and was silenced abruptly, turning into a hard block of ice before continuing onward on its trajectory and slamming into her like a cannonball. The impact was hard enough to send her flying backwards and drive the air out of her lungs. Less than an eye blink later, she bounced off the wall behind her and slid to the floor, dazed.

Her sight blurring as the pain drove tears into her eyes, she desperately struggled to get off a spell at the rapidly advancing red figure. "Shabon Sp- AHH!"

"No more of this!" the Reaper growled, interrupting the spell through the simple but effective way of stomping down on the girl, hard. He thought he heard some ribs cracking as the girl gasped in pain. He smiled. Life was good. The next part was going to be tricky, however. If he killed her, then he would be stuck here for the foreseeable future. If he didn't, she would probably freeze him again, and then look for a more fail-proof way to keep him confined. If that happened, he wouldn't be able to escape even if she excavated a portal. No, he'd have to bully her into going along with his plans and being too scared to do anything about it.

"I am greatly displeased by your treatment of me," he continued, leaning down to the figure still trapped underneath his weight until his steaming breath touched her face with every word. "Order your imps to start digging toward the south-east, or I will kill you!"

"If you k-kill me, you'll be back to being stuck here forever," the insufferable brat breathed, voice faltering.

How inconsiderate. She might be smarter than he had given her credit for, or at least was more perceptive. "You got me there. I'm merely going to make you wish I had killed you. I am a demon after all, and causing pain is what we are good at." She shivered in fear. As she rightfully should.

"You are still going to kill me after you have what you want," she

answered in a whisper.

"Not necessarily. You see, I ~was~ rather furious at you for backstabbing me, and putting me on ice like that. I should have expected it, really, that's what Keepers do. I think what angered me the most was that a slight girl like you succeeded at taking me down. But now that I have re-affirmed the natural order, I am willing to let bygones be gone. Let's have a fresh start and work together, how about it?" He realised he meant it, too, even as he casually decapitated the imps coming to their mistress' aid, one after the other.

However, there still was that obstinate, defiant look in her eyes even as she struggled to shake her head. "I don't trust you."

Which left him with a bit of a problem. It was embarrassing, really. He had no problem with torture as such, except that he wasn't very good at it. Killing he could do. Torture, not so much. Lack of experience combined with a sick enthusiasm for cutting flesh left most of his victims dead before any desirable results could be achieved. Other than death, of course. Hmm, what could he do that wouldn't cause too much damage? He snorted at the thought. Him, worried about causing too much damage. Then he had a bright idea. She was a female, so...

"A stupid choice. I see you need some more 'convincing'."

Ami felt true terror at the malice expressed in those few words. Then, a scaled hand reached down, and grabbed a hold of the front of her sailor senshi uniform. Her body jerked as the demon gave the garment a violent tug, and with an agonised ripping noise, the front half came off. *Oh no. No! No! NO! Not that!* Ami froze in horror as she felt the chill of the dungeon air on the exposed skin of her chest. *I wish I had died instead! I wish I was a real Keeper and knew how to get out of this situation!* Having barely finished the panicked thought, she felt a surge of energy from the dungeon heart, as if she had just re-affirmed their connection. The next moment, she was gone.

The Horned Reaper looked at the blank ground in dismay and dropped the ragged piece of bow and white cloth he had been

holding. Why did the brat have to pick *now* of all times to figure out Keeper transport? Uh oh. He felt the familiar drop in temperature when the air filled with fog. "Goodness," the demon let out a heart-felt curse.

"Shabon Spray Freezing!"

The voice calling out the attack name was full with righteous female fury, its direction lost to the sound-muffling qualities of this accursed fog. He barely managed to get out of the way. That had come from behind. Then he had to throw himself to the ground to dodge another blast of freezing water, this time from the right and above. So her transportation hadn't been a one-time thing. Double goodness. To summarise: he was fighting an angry Keeper with a ranged attack that could take him out of the fight in a single good hit, who was able to teleport nearly at will within her own dungeon, he couldn't even see her, and to make matters worse, he couldn't even attack her dungeon heart instead! This was the kind of unfair fight he never wanted to be on the wrong side of.

"You know, I," he dodged under a ray of frost,"really meant what I said about starting over," the Reaper ran, diving behind the cover of the dungeon heart's dais just as a spray of icy water splashed against it, turning into icicles.

"We don't have to fight! I could serve you by - ah, will you give it a rest already?" deflecting an incoming attack with a fireball from his scythe, he stepped aside, only to slip on the floor covered with ice. *Great. Now she is getting creative too!* "There's no reason for us to fight! You have shown that you have the needed ruthlessness to succeed as a Keeper!" Were her attacks coming less frequently? He thought so. "Come on, be reasonable. You are mortal and will tire out eventually. I am not, and can- Darkness!" he barely jumped out of a blast that came from straight above. How in the blazes of hell had she done that? He continued trying to convince her. "Look, if trust is the issue, I can swear allegiance to you at the dungeon heart, Then I won't be able to attack you or the heart, and you will be able to use your powers on me! Even if I chose to betray you later, the bond dissolving would warn you! Just consult the heart and you'll know that I'm not lying." Hating himself for doing so, he added: "Please?"

Silence, but no more attacks. He took that as an encouraging sign, and walked toward the looming black pillars that were the dungeon heart superstructure seen through the fog. He felt the familiar lure of its power, and opened himself to it, basking in its acceptance for a moment.

"It is done. Now do you finally believe me?"

The Reaper stood motionless, waiting for a response. It came rather quickly. SLAP! Reeling, from the invisible blow, he wondered what had just happened. SLAP! Ouch! Oh, that. He had all but forgotten that Keepers could do that. SLAP! SLAP! SLAPSLAPSLAPSLAPSLAPSLAP! Stumbling backward from the cascade of stinging blows, the Reaper felt himself roll down the stairs leading up to the dungeon heart. To add insult to injury, his own folded-up scythe hit him in the head on the way down.

Stupid, hysteric, overreacting human females. "All right! I get the message! Stop it already!" Perhaps it was the hint of barely restrained fury in his voice that convinced the girl that continuing would be a bad idea. In the ensuing silence, he heard faint sobbing from somewhere else in the room. The fog was fading out of existence now.

"Mercury Power, Make Up!" A flash of blue light concealed Ami for a split second when she triggered her transformation to restore her ruined outfit. It also re-applied her make-up, removing all traces of crying, and cleaned her body, as it was intended to. To the senshi, everything felt normal. Her sailor crystal, embedded within the dungeon heart, felt rather confused though. Not with providing its magical power, everything was working as normal there. No, it wasn't quite certain what to apply the cosmetic operations to. There were just so many connections, going every which way. Which one to choose? The non-sentient crystal had no way to take a decision, so it just chose all of them. A cylinder of light, centred on the heart, started expanding through the dungeon, leaving only gleaming cleanness in blue and white tones and the occasional Mercury symbol in its wake.

The Horned Reaper felt weird, but not unpleasant sensations when the light washed over him, momentarily blinding him. He blinked

against the glare, then stared at the new imps, his eyebrows rising up nearly to his horns. He let out an amused snort. Then, as a horrible suspicion dawned, he slowly looked down at himself. "Must not kill her. Must not kill her. Must not kill her. Must not kill her," was the mantra he desperately repeated inside his mind for the next several minutes. It took him that long to re-gain enough of his composure to growl out the words: "Whatever you did just now, NEVER. DO. IT. AGAIN!"

Ami missed a step at the bellow, startled. What was his problem now? Never mind. She had better get to that crystal ball quickly and see if she could call up that Nicodemus guy again, he might be able to help her with her problems.

The pot-bellied man in question was surprised to get a second request from a Keeper in one day. This was one was targeted at him specifically, too. That could be good or bad, but he wouldn't know until he answered. He gaped in amazement when he saw the girl from before, looking none the worse for wear.

"You? But the Reaper- "

"We reached an agreement," the blue-headed lady replied, her eyes going hard.

Nicodemus nodded dumbly. No surcharge for her, no. He did not want the ire of anyone who could fend of the Reaper and not even look bedraggled. That appearance had to be a glamour. What he caught a glimpse of next through the passage behind the Keeper had him gaping in shock, mouth open like a fish. The Horned Reaper, angrily ripping off a miniskirt just like the one the girl was wearing? A blue bow was waving behind the terrifying red figure like a flag, held in place only by a single thread. Were- were those earrings? LIPSTICK?! Forget about no surcharge, bring out the Valued Trusted Customer Please Don't Kill Me Discount. Whatever could do something like that to the Reaper had to be a horrible, powerful nightmare in disguise.

Last edited: Sep 9, 2016

Some Unfortunate Truths

Originally on 2009-09-15T00:02:00

Ami felt miserable, even if her recent transformation had hidden the outward signs of the previous battle. Still, if she allowed herself to dwell on how exhausted she was, or on what had nearly happened to her, then she would break down completely. The residual panic in her mind just wouldn't go away, so she ruthlessly shoved it aside by focusing on something else instead. The cowled face within the crystal ball was a perfect distraction.

"You were introducing yourself before we were interrupted. Mr Nicodemus Asbraxe, correct?" Ami tried to sound as polite and pleasant as always, but it came out somewhat strained with the way her ribs were aching. A few might even be cracked, she feared.

The fat peddler in goods of dubious origins realised that he had been gaping, and his mouth snapped shut so quickly that his long, grey beard whipped upward. "Ah, yes, of course. What can I do for you Lady...?" he paused expectantly.

"I am Sailor Mercury," the blue-haired Keeper informed him, "and I am in need of some books for my library. Possibly maps too," she added after a moment of hesitation.

"I live to serve, " Nicodemus stated with a bow and a smile. *Because I wish to continue living,* he didn't add. "I do have some books relating to the arcane arts, but it would be helpful if you narrowed down a bit what you are looking for."

Ami needed a moment to consider the question. She hadn't anticipated an opportunity for shopping, after all. Her goal was getting out of this hell-hole and back home, hopefully without unleashing the demon on the world. "Books on travelling magic or transportation. Anything on dungeon hearts, too." The adrenaline was wearing off now, and she felt woozy. Perhaps the battle had taken more out of her than she had thought?

The merchant drew the obvious conclusion. A Keeper who wanted to travel and to create new dungeon hearts could only mean one thing. "Ah, you are preparing for some good old-fashioned conquest then? Any regions that a cautious man such as me should not plan on visiting in the near future?"

Ami felt her legs weaken and leaned forward abruptly, putting one hand left and right on the table next to the crystal ball to steady herself. She bit her teeth together to avoid yelping in pain as the movement shook her hurt rib.

To Nicodemus, it looked as if the Keeper's was baring her teeth at him in anger as her face suddenly filled out most of his conjured image. He jerked back and started sweating. "Forgive me Keeper, that was out of place. I did not mean to question your plans. As for the books you require," here he was starting to feel as if he was digging his own grave, "I am afraid I have nothing like that in stock right now, but I'm sure I could acquire some given-"

"Then get to it!" the voice of the Reaper interrupted. The demon had finished ripping off the last remains of the offending sailor fuku, though he had apparently missed the lipstick. With a satisfied smirk, he noted that the Keeper - Sailor Mercury, what an odd name - still cringed at his approach. His yellow eyes narrowed as he observed her hunched-over pose and the sheen of sweat on her forehead, and continued: "And add in a treatise on the basics of Necromancy while you are at it. Well, what are you waiting for?"

The trader looked from the terrifying monster to the more innocent looking one, who was therefore at least twice as terrifying, nodded once, and disrupted the communication spell, eager to finish this conversation.

Ami turned to face the Reaper with a frown. "Necromancy?"

He flashed her a toothy grin, and answered nonchalantly: "You look as if you'll need it soon."

The sailor senshi's eyes widened in surprise, and she took an involuntary step back. Then she fixed him with a glare. "What do you mean? That had better not been a threat!"

Ohh, her eyes had actually flashed red for a moment there. She must really loathe him. This could prove to be endlessly amusing, if he played it right. "Of course it wasn't," he drawled. "Don't you know anything?" He paused dramatically, making a point to let his gaze sweep over the empty shelves of the library. "No. It is obvious you don't. Oh, wait, there's *something*...". The Reaper bowed down to pick up a thin booklet that looked as if had been blown off a shelf earlier and barely contained four pages. "I stand corrected. It seems as if *this* is the sum total of your magical knowledge."

Ami, who had been about to simply walk away from the taunting, looked interested despite herself. At least until the Reaper started flipping through the issue and started laughing uproariously.

"Those are some of the silliest-looking monsters I have ever seen," he commented, indicating the illustrations of some of the monsters that Ami and her friends had fought together.

Ami had enough. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't just put you back in an ice block and be done with it!"

"Aside from the fact that in your current condition, you would be hard-pressed to do so?" he asked, conveniently leaving out the part where she could technically just use her Keeper powers to put him right in the path of an attack. "You would also lose access to my knowledge, which you can't afford. You are just fumbling around, with no idea or plan about what you are doing, and hoping that everything will turn out all right in the end."

Ami winced. That had struck a bit too close to home for her taste. "Go on."

"You may think that you have plenty of time to figure out how all of this works, but that couldn't be further from the truth. Simply through the act of becoming a Dungeon Keeper, you have made powerful enemies. At the very least, Metriande, the Keeper who imprisoned me here, will have sensed that someone snatched up her inactive sub-heart here. She is bound to investigate sooner rather than later, as she will want it back." *If she is still alive after all these centuries.* He hoped she was, he would pay her a visit.

Noting the brat's brightening expression, he fought the urge to bury his face in his palm. "No, that is not a good thing! You cannot just give it back. Claiming a dungeon heart constitutes a pact with the forces of darkness. Once you lose your last dungeon heart, you die, and your soul is snatched up by one of the dark gods. The same happens in case you die normally, but the heart will survive and be up for grabs in that case. Which one do you think Metriande will go for?" Oh, how the girl was going white as a sheet now. She had taken an attentive posture at the start of his lecture, apparently on reflex, but now her fists were clenching and unclenching, and she was shaking.

"You didn't mention any of that before!" Ami shouted accusingly.

"Which is exactly why you need to keep me around. You wouldn't want to run afoul of any other nasty surprises, would you?" the Reaper retorted, enjoying this and making no attempt to hide the fact.

"I hate you!"

Ah, red-flashing eyes again, and now she was stomping off. Oh, faltered in her step there. Must have noticed the imps.

Ami blinked when she spotted the tiny bug-eyed servant creatures, all four of them sporting miniature versions of her sailor fuku, and looking quite happy about it. And why shouldn't they? It was a vast step up from the filthy loincloths they had been wearing before. Deciding that she didn't really care to find out how that had happened right now, and that she desperately needed rest, she gave them new tasks instead.

The Horned Reaper watched in amusement as the Keeper created a new, bare chamber for herself, and then lay down on pieces of coarse carpet pilfered from the library. Hah, a Keeper resting in conditions like that. He'd be able to tease her about that for decades if he didn't kill her first. Not that he could at the moment, seeing how the entrance to the new room was too small for him to fit through. Maybe he'd tell her how to use her powers to acquire more comfortable quarters when she woke up. Maybe.

Fire Reading

Originally on 2009-09-16T23:03:00

Rei Hino kneeled on the floor with her eyes closed, and dressed in her red and white-robes. In front of her roared the temple's sacred flame, and to her right sat a black cat with a crescent-shaped spot on her forehead. Kneeling next to the shrine maiden was a girl with long blonde pig-tails, who was looking back and forth from the fire to the chanting girl. Usagi's expression conveyed worry as well as cautious optimism. Suddenly, the flames changed as a transparent picture appeared within.

"She's alive! Ami is alive!" the blonde let out a relieved cry even as she seemed to blur from her spot, tackling Rei in a joyful hug. Ears flattened against her head, Luna managed to jump aside just in time when the impact of the blonde missile sent both girls sprawling. Much to the cat's chagrin, the vision in the fire disappeared.

"USAGI!" the black-haired girl's temper flared. "Look what you have done now," she scolded, but her heart wasn't really in it.

The blonde, upon being reminded that her interruption had broken Rei's concentration, blushed and scratched her head in embarrassment. "Oops, sorry! But Ami isn't dead! Can you find out where she is?"

"I'll do my best," the taller girl promised and took position in front of the blazing flames again, closing her eyes and chanting a sequence of monosyllabic words. In response, the fire seemed to straighten. The shrine maiden began to speak. "Ami seems to be somewhere underground. A cave maybe?" Suddenly, her eyebrows shot up, and her voice was tinged with worry. "I sense that an enormous source of evil is with her."

Usagi's eyes widened in fright when a new picture appeared in the flames. This time, it wasn't her friend tossing and turning in her sleep. A monstrous, red-skinned devil with long, straight horns on its head was stalking through the underground chamber on massive,

armour-clad hooves. In one hand, it held a wicked scythe. Suddenly, it stopped, and then slowly turned its head into the watchers' direction, until it seemed to stare straight at them with cruel yellow eyes, revealing a fanged grin and a dangling nose ring.

Rei opened her eyes with a start, and the image dispersed. She felt her heart beating rapidly.

"Rei! What was that thing? Did it see us?" Usagi blurted out, having scuttled backward from the sacred fire involuntarily.

"I don't think it could see us, but it felt someone watching," the priestess replied, absently petting Luna, whose hackles were standing on end.

The blonde thought about what they had seen. "But, if that youma is in there with Ami, that means - WAHHH! Ami has been taken prisoner by the Dark Kingdom!" As fast as the crying fit had come, it was over when a look of steely determination appeared on Usagi's face. "We have to help her!"

"How? We don't even know where the Dark Kingdom is!" the raven-haired girl snapped.

"But Rei..." Usagi whined, tears in her eyes. Suddenly, Luna found herself snatched off the ground and looking into Usagi's eyes. "Don't you have something we can use Luna? You have to come up with a plan!"

"I don't think so..."

"Try to remember! Ami needs our help!"

"Put poor Luna down, meatball head!" Rei shouted, saving the cat from being shaken by the desperate crybaby. The moon cat landed on all fours, somewhat shakily. "We will just have to take the fight to the Dark Kingdom! We should try to capture the next youma and force it to answer our questions!"

"Don't call me that! And how do you suggest..."

As the bickering started in earnest, Luna shook her head sadly. Why

did it have to be the level-headed of her soldiers who got captured?

Ami awoke after a night of half-remembered nightmares to the sound of high-pitched squeals and stomping footsteps. She rubbed the sleep out of her eyes and got up, feeling rather stiff from sleeping on the barely padded floor. A twinge from her chest was an unpleasant reminder of her cracked rib. She stopped at the very narrow opening leading to the main chamber to see what all the noise was about. A squealing imp rushed past, little legs moving as quickly as they could. Hot on its heels was the Reaper, a gleeful grin on its face and scythe held high.

Ami grimaced. Why did she have to deal with something like this so soon after waking up. "WHAT ARE YOU DOING? STOP THAT RIGHT NOW!" she shouted, just as the Reaper cut the bug-eyed servant in twain from top to bottom. The two halves fell apart and then dissolved into motes of green light, and even the blood disappeared.

The red demon turned to look at the Keeper. "Just having some harmless fun. Don't worry, new ones just keep appearing as long as you have less than four." True to his words, a new imp was already jumping out of the dungeon heart's pit, surrounded by a greenish glow.

"That's not the point! You can't just go around killing them! They are intelligent beings that never have done anything to you!" once again, Ami felt herself horrified by the casual brutality of the Reaper.

The demon considered that point. 'Intelligent' wasn't the word he would use to describe imps. He shrugged. "Fine, I'll leave them alone." *For now.* He was feeling rather mellow after several hours of fun. How he had missed random mindless slaughter during the centuries of boredom. "Also, someone was scrying on us earlier," he added in the hopes of changing the topic. Slaps were annoying. "This means the location is no longer secure. It is about time that you stop fooling around and build this dungeon up to something respectable, raise an army, and build up your defences."

The blue-haired girl in the sailor fuku narrowed her eyebrows at him. "And what if I only want to find a way to get home?"

"Well, that would be a foolish waste of the opportunity to become rich, powerful and feared. In any case, you will need time to find a way back to wherever you came from - not an easy task, as you do not originate from this plane of existence, if my guess is correct. I have never before seen creatures like the ones in your book, and your type of magic is foreign to me. You do not *have* time. Someone is bound to show up sooner, rather than later. You need to be ready do defend yourself and your dungeon heart by then."

Watching the girl's expression, he concluded that she still seemed unconvinced. "Of course, if you just want to roll over and die, that's your prerogative. I will be free either way."

"Why are you so convinced that anyone who shows up will automatically be hostile?" Ami asked finally, after mulling things over.

"Simple. You are a Dungeon Keeper. The best you can expect from other Keepers is being enslaved and becoming their loyal pet, if they see any potential in you. Unlikely, with the current state of your dungeon," the Reaper chuckled. "As for all others, they will see you as evil. Capital 'E' evil. And why should they not? As a dungeon keeper, you are already damned. Any good you do can only be a trick to enable greater evil at a later point. After all, the dark gods will claim your soul, and there can be no redemption for you. Much better for the heroes to just destroy you outright and make the world a better place."

Ami was silent for a long time after this, staring at the ground as her fingers clenched into fists. When she looked up, blue eyes flashed to red in anger for a moment. "And it's all your fault that this is happening to me," she snapped.

The demon leaned on his scythe and made a dismissive hand gesture. "I'm sure you'll come to appreciate it in time, once you have gotten used to it."

Frustrated, the furious senshi pondered whether the loathsome creature would die if she dug a deep enough pit and dropped him into it. Instead, she forced herself to calm down and get more vital information. "Is there any technical reason that necessitates that a

dungeon heart be only used for evil?" Ami asked, crossing her arms in front of her chest defensively. The idea of being forced into the role of the villain still didn't appeal to her at all.

The Reaper made a face as if he had just smelled something vile. "Not using it for evil? Where would be the fun in that? But to answer your question: the process of creating a dungeon heart requires the blessing of at least one of the dark gods. Committing the blasphemy of using it for good," he snorted dismissively, "would ensure that they call a dark crusade against the fool attempting it. No single Keeper could hope to survive against the united might of all others."

His grin widened, and his yellow eyes shone with unholy glee. "In short, all you have to do is crush all the other Keepers before attempting such a thing! Go right ahead, it shall be glorious!"

Last edited: Jul 9, 2016

Basic Functionality

Originally on 2009-09-19T00:59:00

"This is a totally inappropriate use of my abilities," the Horned Reaper growled, swinging his scythe. A fireball whooshed away from the weapon, down into the large chamber below. It splashed into a large rectangular basin filled with molten metal. Its orange glow became noticeably brighter, and an imp squealed in fright as it barely avoided being scalded by a rain of red droplets.

"You complained that you were bored," Ami, leaning against the unfinished rock of the cave , replied without looking up from the black tome that was hiding her face.

"Don't you have coal for this?" the demon growled, unleashing another blast of flame into the smelter. It struck suspiciously close to a bug-eyed imp who was struggling to drag an ore-filled bag toward the bubbling pool. "At least you could take your nose out of this infernal book and be useful! You probably know it by heart by now, anyway!"

Lowering the book enough so she could peer over it, the blue-haired girl gave the towering figure standing next to her on the balcony overlooking the cave a questioning glance. In the red glow of the furnace, her blue eyes looked nearly violet. "Only the first six chapters," she replied in all seriousness.

Realising that she wasn't joking, the Reaper felt a vein throb in his forehead. He thought back to how she had refused at first to learn the first steps of Necromancy. He'd had to explain that the book contained a healing spell she could use to fix her ribs before she even deigned open it. The only bright point of that entire headache-inducing situation had been the terrified grovelling of that cowled merchant type when he explained that he had not been able to find any other of the books the Keeper desired. "Never mind that now. You should be moving the ore while the imps mine. With only four of them, it's going to take forever otherwise."

Ami considered the point, and then reluctantly put the skull-encrusted book down. She faded from her spot overseeing the mining and melting operations and shimmered back into existence on the ground, next to where her imps were striking at the rock with their picks. One of the four was just about done stuffing the raw nuggets into a sack. The young Keeper walked over to the bag and lifted it. Or at least attempted to. While her senshi transformation vastly increased her strength, she was also a slight girl, and the container outweighed her. Losing her balance, she fell over and landed on top of the dusty bag with a grunt of surprise that was lost in the clanging of metal on stone echoing through the chamber.

"While I appreciate the sight of you making a fool out of yourself, I don't want this to take any longer than strictly necessary," the Reaper quipped, which earned him a glare. Coming from a face covered in dirt, it only made him chuckle. "I meant for you to use your Keeper abilities to move the ore. You can use them to move anything that belongs to you, not only yourself," he explained, while preparing to fire another fiery projectile into the molten mass below.

Ami stepped away from the bag and stared at it with a look of intense concentration. The sack twitched once, and then tipped over, spilling freshly-mined ore all over the floor. Then, the now empty wrapping disappeared and suddenly burst into flame a foot above the boiling mass of rock and metal. Covering her mouth with one hand, Ami watched as the charred remains ascended on the hot updraft and dispersed.

"Visualising the ability as picking something up with a giant invisible hand helps with control,or so my former Keeper told me," came the deep voice from above. "Keep trying until you get it right!"

Soon after, piles of glittering ore faded from their position on the ground, only to splash into the smelter with some regularity. When the noise stopped for some reason, the demon looked up from his task, only to see that the Keeper had that strange blue visor over her eyes and was staring at an empty spot in mid air, while her fingers danced over that weird rectangular not-a-book she conjured up sometimes. "What's the hold up?"

"I'm trying to find out where the ore goes between the moment I pick

it up and before I drop it again," the short-haired girl replied, attention focused on the figures flickering over her visor. This was fascinating! She could see the ghostly outline of a hand, a just-as-ghostly load of ore held within. Experimentally, she turned the immaterial appendage over. The ore stuck to it, as if unaffected by gravity. Hmm. Could she use this power to pluck material directly out of the vein? No, apparently not. It was limited to interacting only with things that already belonged to her, as far as she could tell. So what would happen if she just wished the whole hand to appear, rather than just its contents?

From the Reaper's elevated vantage point, he could see a translucent shape of a hand appear in mid-air, filled with dirty stones. The mound of rubble immediately lost cohesion and slipped out of the hand's grasp, trailing a dust cloud on the way to the ground. "Great work, Keeper. You have found another way to turn something that works neatly into something messy and inefficient. Truly time well spent." The sarcasm in his voice turned to anger. "Now stop fooling around! I'm getting IMPATIENT!"

A while later, both the fuku-clad girl and the demon were standing on the lowest level of the chamber, watching as a thin stream of molten gold trickled out of the bottom of the smelter. The metal ran down a narrow channel and finally gathered within depressions set into the ground to the left and to the right of the groove. "This should be a barely adequate start," the Reaper commented, eyeing the red-hot substance critically. "We were rather lucky that the ore was too low yield for the previous Keeper to bother with."

Ami just nodded silently. He had explained to her earlier that the dungeon heart worked like a reverse philosophers' stone, and turned gold into baser materials. Thus, given enough gold, it could create all materials required for a construction project in just the right qualities and quantities, leading to end results that were in general superior than what could be achieved by gathering the required resources manually. She'd double-check that information later, of course. If she had learned anything, it was not to blindly trust the murderous beast.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Put it in your treasury so the heart can use it for alchemy."

"It's still molten," the senshi protested, looking at the gleaming pools that were radiating heat.

"So? It's not as if you are going to burn your hands," *though I wouldn't put it past you to find a way to do just that*, the red demon waved the objection aside, and tapped his scythe against the ground impatiently. "Just do it. We have wasted enough time here."

Still doubtful, Ami complied, and made the liquid gold disappear from its containers and re-appear in the vault several hundred metres above. She still hadn't gotten used to how she was aware of exactly where everything within her dungeon was located, as if she had a three-dimensional map in her head. It was quite creepy. Fully expecting to find a spreading puddle of hot metal, she teleported herself to the treasure chamber. The treasury was another build pattern that Ami had dug out of the dungeon heart's bowels. It had been surprisingly complex for what she thought was basically storage space. Nevertheless, she had not run into trouble setting a treasury up. The frightening Reaper had insistent that the dungeon needed one, for some reason.

Now that she was seeing the small hill of freshly minted, glittering coins resting on the mirrored floor of the chamber, she could appreciate the suggestion. Her dungeon heart felt as if it was brimming with energy, ready to call forth its powers on her slightest whim. Gaping at the riches sparkling in the torchlight, she needed several seconds to realise that this all belonged to *her*. She gulped. This was more money than she had ever seen in her life, or even dreamed of having. Back in her own world, she could buy nearly anything she wished with even a part of this. For a moment, she lost herself in daydreams. She saw herself owning a clinic. Going on a cruise with her friends. Attending any university of her choice. Shaking her head in wonder, she took a step forward and bowed down to pick up one of the coins, feeling the cool, heavy disc rest in her hand. The Mercury symbol was engraved on one side. She flipped it over. Her own face stared back, features set in a regal, haughty expression. Such wealth, she once again thought, still trying to wrap her head around it. And all it had cost her was her soul.

As if summoned by that sobering thought, heavy footsteps echoed through the vault as the Reaper approached. He took in the sight of

the gold, and the corners of his mouth twitched down. "It will have to do," he snorted. "Now follow me. It is time for your next lesson!" He had already caught on to the fact that she was much more obedient when he framed his orders within the context of education. Strange, but he wasn't complaining.

"Now that we have some gold in the coffers, it is time to instruct you in the finer arts of crafting your dungeon," the Reaper stated as both stopped in front of a blank wall. "Summon your imps and start digging. Your dungeon isn't going to impress any entering creatures just yet." Following this proclamation, the demon proceeded to run Ami through a training program that strained her shaping abilities to its limits. Time and again, he found a little flaw in the inclination of a pillar, in the curve of a statue's bat-like wing, or in the pattern on a bronze brazier, and made her re-create the object from scratch. Still, she was making progress.

Even though Ami felt more exhausted than if she had just sat through a four-hour exam, she was impressed with the results. The rectangular chamber now reminded her a bit of a cathedral with its high and vaulted ceiling, its gleaming floor, and with its rows of pillars framing the path toward the back hall. Instead of an altar, a massive throne with an arched back stood elevated against the back wall, framed by flaring braziers on both sides. She didn't care much for the decorations, statues of grotesque monsters looming within the thirteen alcoves that took the place of windows, but the Reaper had designed those himself by invoking some magic built into the room. Right now, the demon was stomping towards her, the sound of its hooves muffled somewhat by the red carpet leading up to the throne. "That will do," he finally nodded.

Ami gave a slight smile of satisfaction. Yes, the place looked as if it was right out of some (sinister) fairy tail palace. However, currently the soft, comfortable-looking pillows lining the walls were much more attractive to her than the décor. She really could do with some rest.

"Hmm, you are still here?" the voice of the Horned Reaper startled her out of her contemplation of the furniture. She turned her head, only to see that he had sat down on the throne. The over-sized dimensions of the seat fitted the towering demon perfectly. "This is my room. Go make your own if you want one. Shoo," his voice

taunted. Pointy fangs gleamed while his grin widened in reaction to the Keeper opening and closing her mouth mutely, like a fish. "What, you expected me to work for free, did you?" he mocked.

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So Hungry

Originally on 2009-09-20T19:36:00

Ami felt the urge to slap the Reaper around with her Keeper powers for his insolence, but ruthlessly clamped down on it when she realised what she was thinking. *Can't let this place get to me,* she thought. That she was scared of what he might do was also partly responsible for her hesitation to strike directly at the demon smirking down at her from his throne. She turned in place so fast that her skirt whipped around her legs, and stalked toward the door, never once looking back. Thus, she missed the disappointed frown on the Reaper's face. He had been looking forward to an explosion of some sort from the way her eyes had turned almost completely red in rage.

On the threshold of the room, Ami stopped. Without turning, she stated in a deceptively calm tone of voice. "As you seem to like this room so much, why don't you stay here for a while?" Behind her, she heard the impact of large boulders as the doorway crumbled, rendering the question a rhetorical one. An imp rolled out of the avalanche of stone and dust, landed in front of her, giggled gleefully, and skittered down a side tunnel. Ami heard some muffled clanging noises from behind the collapsed exit, which were soon followed by vile curses. Her lips twitched up in satisfaction. That should hold that maniac for a while, if his previous behaviour was any indication. If *she* had been an immortal, tireless demon trapped in some underground prison, she'd have used the centuries to dig her way out. Even if the walls were nigh impenetrable, she was pretty sure the ceiling wasn't. He was just lazy.

Appearing next to her dungeon heart, Ami decided that she could no longer ignore the problem of her growling stomach. With renewed vigour, she scanned through the patterns stored within the magical artefact, searching for a solution. The emergency food supply, a huge, segmented maggot corpse frozen within an ice block, was still not looking any more appetising than when it had still wriggled around. Ami reasoned that if she was supposed to field armies, it

would only be logical for there to be a way to feed them. Unless all the monsters were like Angry Red, who had weathered centuries without sustenance? Her limited experience wasn't much help - she didn't know if youma ate anything.

After a while of concentrated work, Ami let out a relieved cheer when she found what she had been looking for. It was so much easier to focus one's attention when there wasn't a huge, sulphur-smelling monster in the room. At the thought of checking up on the Reaper, she experienced a strange moment of double-vision. Superposed over her surroundings, she saw the demon sitting on his throne, chin resting on one hand, and sulking. The strangeness passed as quickly as it had appeared. Blinking, Ami chalked this up to being another feature of the dungeon heart, and returned to mentally plotting out the location for her new room.

By now, Ami was more familiar with crafting rooms from pre-set patterns, and having gold really took all the difficulty out of it, she pondered. Before her, a formerly empty cave exploded into a maelstrom of earthen colours as gold coins rained down from somewhere above, striking the floor in places and transforming like strange seeds. Structures grew and expanded outward from the impact points, devouring all empty space in an eye blink.

Ami looked around. The smell was rather agricultural, but she took that as an encouraging sign. The entire floor of the room was covered in muck, and there were a few shabby wooden sheds. Clucking noises informed her that these were henhouses. As if on cue, a fluffy yellow chick peered out, and then hopped down to the ground below, where it started scratching and pecking in the dirt. A dozen others followed the first one, and soon the air resounded with their chirping. Ami, for her part, had mixed feelings about this. She was glad about now having a food supply, but while she knew intellectually that people ate chicken all the time, she was a city girl. The thought of taking one of those birds, wringing its neck, then butchering it left her feeling queasy. A new thought brightened her mood. Chickens meant eggs! With a spring in her step, she approached the nearest henhouse.

As expected, the low building was warm, dimly lit, and full of nesting hens. Ami stared at the rows of lined-up nests resting on shelves

along the walls. Only a few of them contained eggs, as far as she could tell. She stared at the closest one. A vicious looking hen stared back balefully. The senshi was undeterred. She had faced various youma in battle, armed with nothing but bubbles, and no mere bird was going to get between her and her objective! Determinedly, she took a step close and waved her hands.

"Shoo! Go away!"

The hen spread her wings over her clutch in challenge. With the way her comb fell over its beak, it looked almost as if she was scowling.

It's a good thing the Reaper isn't around to see this, Ami reflected as she dashed out of the door amidst a cloud of feathers and straw, left hand held protectively over her ducked head, the right one pressing three eggs against her chest. An angrily clucking chicken was hot on her heels, batting its wings furiously. Ami remembered that she could teleport, and performed a tactical withdrawal. Looking down at her quarry, she smiled. Mission successful!

Her elation evaporated a few minutes later when, upon being subjected to her improvised cooking equipment, the eggs dissolved into green motes of mana. What? WHY? Grumbling, Ami, reappeared on the hatchery grounds, fading into view with her visor already covering her eyes. After batting away a still irate hen, she pulled out her palmtop computer and started analysing what she saw. Her shoulders sagged upon reading the results: all of the living beings here were conjured from pure magic, which made them inedible. The muck was full of dead bugs and worms and the likes, though, which were all made of transfigured matter and in the process of being greedily devoured by the pecking chickens. Which, presumably, would make the latter real enough to consume at some point, as well as their future offspring.

Ami figured that transfiguration of material directly into living beings didn't work for some reason. She would have to find a book on it. Bitterly, she considered the chicken feed. Transfiguration into dead organic matter was obviously possible, so if whoever created this pattern had specified 'sandwich' instead of 'dead vermin', she wouldn't be so hungry right now. Well, she didn't have a few days to wait for her animals to mature, so another solution was required.

Perhaps that trader again? Arriving in the library, she contemplated for a moment that teleportation was really convenient. Unfortunately, the crystal ball she had accidentally contacted Mr. Abraxe with failed to show a reaction this time around. More likely was that he just wasn't answering because he still hadn't acquired the books she requested. Sigh. She eyed the single tome resting on the otherwise empty shelves. No. While its graphical descriptions could ruin one's appetite, that wouldn't be enough to take her mind off her growing hunger. Near the dungeon heart, the frozen, sickly white flesh of the maggot creature glittered, as if taunting her.

No! She still had another option. She could visit the surface, now that she had the Reaper locked away. *Yes, he's still sulking*, she confirmed when she mentally checked on him. So far, so good. She would have to be careful, of course. Make a tunnel that first led far away from the dungeon heart, and sized to only allow passage to an imp. She could move herself to its end without crossing the intervening space effortlessly, so why take a risk? She would also make sure that this exit was easy to collapse, just in case. If she proceeded cautiously and stealthily, there would be little danger of detection, right? Her stomach growled a confirmation.

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Meet the Locals

Originally on 2009-09-22T18:11:00

Ami looked up, scanning the ceiling of the narrow tunnel with her visor. Tree roots were protruding from the earthen roof and formed a dense web. Nothing gave the impression that anything living larger than a rabbit was anywhere near the location she had chosen for her first foray to the surface. At her nod, an imp squeezed past her legs and started swinging its pick at the soil, soon opening a hole through which faint light fell in from above.

Ami brushed a stubborn root out of the way and stepped into the pillar of light, revelling in the smell of fresh air as she got a look at the forest canopy above. Loose earth crumbled under her gloves as she reached for the edge of the exit and pulled herself up. Staying ducked with one knee in the grass right after emerging, she cautiously surveyed the surrounding trees and bushes. The complete absence of danger convinced her to stand up. She couldn't see very far due to both the tree trunks and the lighting conditions. Quickly identifying the tallest nearby tree, she hopped to its lowest-hanging branch and made her way up from there with little difficulty. Her feet and fingers easily found purchase on the ancient oak's gnarled bark, and soon enough, she found herself sitting on a branch that gave her a good view of the surrounding countryside.

The sky near the horizon glowed a faint red as daybreak approached, but Ami could still make out stars above her position. None of the constellations were familiar to her, quashing the faint hope that she was still in some part of her own world. She felt a wave of homesickness hit her at the discovery. Was she ever going to get home and see her friends and family again? What was this prolonged absence going to do to her attendance record?

The growling of her stomach snapped Ami out of her morose thoughts and focused her attention back on a more immediate and more solvable problem. She looked around, getting a good view of the landscape from her elevated vantage point. She was in the

middle of some kind of forest. A few kilometres to the east, it gave way to open countryside, with wheat fields swinging softly in the breeze. She could make out the squat buildings of a sleepy village in their midst, as well as a road that led somewhere into hilly territory beyond. In the distance, thin streamers of smoke rose into the sky, indicating the presence of more towns. People meant she could get food and information, Ami thought happily. Nothing else really stood out to her, except for a patch of forest that looked more sickly than the rest. Mentally correlating it with the position of her dungeon, Ami concluded that there could be a connection. Yet something else to look into, she sighed.

The girl started to make her way to the nearest village. She pondered how she was going to handle this. Should she transform back to her civilian form? The thought of being unpowered in the middle of an unknown and potentially dangerous world didn't sit too well with her. Besides, she could make much better time in senshi form. She wouldn't be able to hop from branch to branch like this as her normal self, she mused, while underbrush rushed past underneath.

Money would not be a problem. Or maybe it would, if someone recognised that it was her own face on the gold coins. She wasn't sure how, or even if, that interacted with her senshi disguise magic, but she felt no need to find out. The imps could prepare a few coins by scratching off that side while she approached her destination. This left the issue of clothing. She was well aware that her sailor fuku wasn't exactly the most modest of garments, and she had no idea whether it would constitute acceptable female clothing in this society. She could sew, as she insisted in doing well in all of her classes, which included Home Economics. That didn't help all that much, as she didn't have time or material to make something more concealing. Unless...

The Reaper awoke with a start when a loud ripping noise resounded through his throne room. He noted that the exit was still blocked by a pile of rubble - curse the brat - so what had made the noise? An asymmetry in the room drew his attention to one of a pair of decorative curtains dangling from the ceiling. Its twin was conspicuously absent. The demon's expression turned more

displeased than normal. What was the Keeper vandalising his room for?

Ami felt somewhat ridiculous wearing the long, hooded cloak that had been a dark red curtain only minutes before. Imps were not the most talented tailors, to put it mildly, but the garment hadn't turned out too badly. Sure, it was a bit frayed around the edges, but it did its job quite well. They even had managed to put the darker-coloured patterns on the curtain near the bottom seam. She just hoped those strange symbols in a darker colour were just decorations, rather than having a meaning she didn't know.

Ami could feel the first rays of the rising sun warming her chin. Her eyes were still in the shadow cast by the hood, which she had pulled down deeply into her face. While she didn't need to hide her tiara, which she had left behind, she might want to use her visor at some point, without attracting undue attention. Well, more attention than she was already drawing, she admitted. The few other people on the road were wearing peasant garb and doing agricultural things, such as driving cows to the pasture. All of them were giving her curious and suspicious looks. *Well, I do look almost exactly like one of those stereotypical evil sorcerers from one of Usagi's mangas,* Ami though with a sad smile, *all I'm missing is a sinister-looking staff.* A younger boy sucking on a straw was so distracted by the sight of her that he didn't watch where he was going, and collided with the rear end of a slow bovine. Ami nodded a greeting, which the villagers answered with a nod of their own, or a wave of their hand. None ever approached her though. Even the *cows* circled around her in a wide bow. Hanging her head, Ami figured that she might have been better off just arriving in her fuku.

As the hungry girl approached the settlement, the heavenly smell of freshly-baked bread made her pick up her pace. A few steps further in, the smell of medieval squalor hit her full-force, and made her wrinkle her nose in disgust. The morning breeze did its best to disperse the unpleasant odour, and Ami resolved to simply ignore it and find something to eat. The villagers were still watching her with suspicion, even though none seemed outright hostile. She also noted that none of the women were wearing anything that revealed more than their ankles, so the cloak had probably been a good idea

after all.

A rooster crowed from the gable of one of the straw-thatched wooden buildings, drawing her gaze into that direction, and from there to the larger two-storey building whose sign clearly identified it as an inn. While walking in its direction, she noticed that several horses were stabled in the stable attached to the building. Business must be going well.

Ami opened the door and stopped for a moment until her eyes adjusted to the dimmer conditions inside. All eyes inside turned to the cloaked and hooded figure outlined within the door frame. The murmur inside died down. This early in the morning, around half of the round wooden tables and chairs were unoccupied, but Ami nevertheless fidgeted at being the centre of attention. A faint blush appeared on her cheeks and she stepped inside. The aroma of cooked meat wafted in her direction, and she felt her mouth water. When she sat down at one of the tables near the counter to the right side of the room, conversations resumed, and hands that had moved to swords in anticipation of trouble relaxed. She drew a second round of curious glances when she lowered her hood, this time directed at her short blue hair, and the hushed gossiping doubled in intensity. She overheard a few sentence fragments.

"... blue? ... think she's fey?" "... no, touching the iron cutlery..." "... but ... gloves ..." "...rather young... " "... witch looking for trouble..." "... hair's so short... disgraced... ?"

The innkeeper distracted Ami from the fact that she was currently the object of the local gossip by asking to take her order. He was lean, slouched, and with his overly long nose and the two tufts of greying hair around his ears on an otherwise bald head, he reminded her a bit of vulture. Ami ordered a large breakfast, and had to pay in advance. She whisked one of her adjusted gold coins from her stash, hoping that it would be accepted without too much trouble. The innkeeper took a look at it, then bit into it, and nodded.

"Can't say I have seen that symbol before. Good, solid gold though. Travelled a long way, have you?"

Ami shrugged, and answered honestly "I don't really know. I got

here by a magical accident, and am not even sure where 'here' is."

The man's eyebrows seemed to develop a life of their own as they crept up his forehead. "Oh, how curious. This is the village of Goodplace, within the Barony of Blisshire, in the Kingdom of Morgan the Great." His expression turned sympathetic when it became clear that the girl (she couldn't be older than his own daughter) did not recognise any of these names. "You must be from a far away place indeed."

Ami, who noted that conversation was dying down again since the other guests were trying to eavesdrop, decided that it couldn't hurt to let them know about her origins. "I'm from the city of Tokyo in Japan."

"Sorry, I can't say that I have heard of it, Miss" Perking up, the innkeeper asked. "You mentioned a magical accident. Are you a wizard's apprentice, then?"

"I can do a little magic," Ami admitted. "Not enough to get me home, unfortunately."

"I thought so, " the man replied, "but you might be in luck." He stretched his left arm in a wide gesture that encompassed the room. "You may have noticed that the inn's unusually well occupied for this time of the year."

She hadn't, but at his words, she took another look at the other guests. There were the expected farmer types, but many of the men and women looked to be of a rougher sort. Mercenaries or guards perhaps. Some of them were wearing light leather armour, and she could see a bunch of spears and swords resting in a corner.

"A week ago, the Baron's herald passed through town, notifying everyone that the Baron is gathering heroes for a strike against the terrible Keeper Arachne, who is devastating the North of the shire. Thus, we have all kinds of adventurers passing through. If you accompanied them to the castle, you'd meet many wise and powerful wizards, one of whom might be able to send you home."

After these encouraging words, the talkative man lowered his voice

conspiratorially, "Although you might want to change the style of your robes, no offence. If you went looking like this, people would think you were going to join the *Keeper*. In this land, that style is associated with evil warlocks and other unsavoury types. They use the hoods to hide how the dark magic twists their features, you see."

Ami suppressed a gulp. Technically, she was one of those 'other unsavoury types', but there was absolutely no reason to mention any of that. The waitress appeared and set a plate down in front of the famished girl. It contained steaming potatoes and some kind of sausage she didn't recognise. The meal also came with a large mug of foamy beer. She was too young to drink, wasn't she?

One of the other guests, a man build like a bear, with a shaggy black beard and matching hair, stood up slowly, and interrupted her train of thoughts. "Twisted features indeed," he bellowed in a voice loud enough to draw attention to everyone in the room. "You can't tell me that *that* hair colour is natural!"

Ami crossed her eyes to look up at his pointed index finger, which quivered with rage, less than a palm's length away from her head.

Last edited: Aug 12, 2016

A Youma's Report

Originally on 2009-09-24T23:44:00

A wide circle of light illuminated the blue-grey floor of the Dark Kingdom's throne room. In its centre stood queen Beryl's throne, an imposing stone affair whose high back ended in a flower-shaped stone arrangement, which in turn formed the bottom of an even larger sculpture whose undefined features gave the impression of hollow eye sockets and curved fangs. None of the courtiers skulking around in the shadows just outside the brighter area was paying attention to the imposing architecture though. The two figures standing within the circle of light, at a respectful distance to the red-headed queen, were much more interesting, though perhaps 'standing' was too generous an expression to describe the left figure's posture.

The blond man was slouching deeply, with his hands on his knees and his head lowered. From time to time, an uncontrollable spasm went through one of his limbs, and thin streamers of smoke rose from his singed uniform, very visible in the bright illumination provided by the multiple spotlights trained on the pair. To his right stood a grey-skinned youma, obviously female in her clinging, slitted green dress. A reptilian tail was swinging left and right like a pendulum in obvious excitement. In stark contrast to her companion, the female stood ramrod-straight as she reported on recent events. "... gone well with the energy harvest, I was preparing the next energy-draining packagings for the crates, when suddenly..."

The square of night sky in the open window of the warehouse was suddenly obstructed by something for a moment. Within an aisle formed by the rows of crates, a red-headed woman who had been in the process of stamping various packaged goods with a cursed seal looked up. Strange, she could have sworn that window was closed before.

"Stop right there!"

Okay, the pigtailed figure in a short fuku was definitely new and unwelcome.

"I'm the sailor warrior of love and justice! Sailor Moon!" the intruder introduced herself, making weird gestures with her hands. "Household appliances should be used to avoid work, not steal energy! In the name of the Moon, I will punish you!"

The enemy! Youma Mareki immediately discarded her human guise. Long red hair turned into stringy green bristles, her body structure became taller and more angular, and a grey tail snaked out from under her green dress. The opponent seemed taken aback by the transformation. An opportunity! With a standing jump, the monster cleared the five metre height difference between herself and the would-be heroine, who had obviously thought herself safe and out of reach on higher ground. Eyes widened in shock and both arms held high to protect her face, Sailor Moon stumbled backward, barely avoiding the youma's double-handed downward blow that shook the entire stack of crates. Crouched on the ground like a stalking tiger, the youma unhinged her jaw, revealing two long, snake-like fangs protruding from her upper gums. A ferocious blast of water shot from her throat. The blonde in the blue sailor fuku let out a frightened "Eeep!" and fell over backwards, slow enough that the stream of water still clipped her trailing pigtails and drenched them.

"Fire Soul!" Suddenly, the murk of the warehouse was banished by a hellish glow that shifted all colours to an orange-red spectrum. Mareki whirled around. An ambush! The seeming incompetence of her attacker had been bait! But she wouldn't fall this easily! A torrent of water shot from her maw, over the deep trenches formed by the alleys between the ordered piles of crates, intercepting the incoming fireball. With a deafening hissing noise, both projectiles cancelled each other out, and the resulting wall of steam hid Mareki's red-skirted attacker from her sight. Catching movement from the corner of her eye, the youma pirouetted on one clawed foot, extending her tail like a whip as she did. Just in time too, as Sailor Moon had been going for her tiara. The tail slap caught the girl in the stomach and sent her flying. The blonde hit the ground with a satisfying hollow sounding thud and continued rolling over, losing her grip on the tiara. With a squeak of surprise, the super-heroine went over the

edge of the platform formed by stacked crates. Mareki could see white-gloved fingers holding on desperately to the wooden ledge. She still couldn't see her other attacker through the obscuring steam, so she swept her breath weapon over the general direction of her adversary in a wide arc before hurriedly walking into the pig-tailed girl's direction.

Sailor Moon could hear the footsteps of the monster echoing through the warehouse as it made a beeline for her, and held on to the edge of the crate she was hanging from. Her fingers were already tiring, and she couldn't find purchase on the slippery surface of the stack with her feet. Then the youma stood over her, a grey misshapen silhouette of malice, its mouth widened into a sadistic grin as it lifted one scaly foot to bring it down on her fingers. Sailor Moon's efforts became more frantic, and one of her kicks hit the gap between the box she was hanging on and the one it was resting on. The jolt was enough to upset the precarious balance of crate, youma, and dangling girl, and as if in slow motion, it began to topple toward the alley. "Uh oh."

Hearing a loud crash, followed by the noise of more masses sliding and wood bursting open, Sailor Mars took a risk and raced through the dissipating steam cloud, jumping over one of the narrow alleys in the process, and landed on the stack Sailor Moon had been fighting the youma. A funnel-shaped gap was toward its far edge, and she could hear the tinkling of some appliances shifting. A sawdust-smelling cloud was rising over the location of the slide. Worried for her friend, the senshi stepped up to the edge of the avalanche, and peered down. Sitting on top of a mound of broken boxes and packages, the girl in question looked back up. On the ground, a scaly grey arm poked out from under the pile, unmoving.

"Good job securing the youma," Sailor Mars grudgingly commented after closing her jaw with an audible click. Sailor Moon gave a half-hearted smile and tried to stealthily rub her backside. *Owie.*

"... found myself tied to a chair, covered in prayer strips, and valiantly resisted vilest tortures as the enemy tried to interrogate me..."

Mareki struggled against her bonds. The damnable prayer strips

sticking to her body were paralysing her and preventing her from accessing her powers. She seemed to be stuck on a chair. Her captors, both only visible as dim fuku-clad silhouettes, had somehow procured a lamp and were pointing it at her.

"All right! Turn it on, Sailor Mars."

Click. Blinding light flooded the youma's eyes, making it hard to see anything at all.

"Eww! Ugly! Turn it off again!"

"No. Stop being such a crybaby!"

Mareki fumed. Ugly, was she? What were those girls trying to do, anyway? The youma cautiously tested the knots holding her wrists together. Ha! Amateurs!

"Soldiers, remember what we are here for," sounded a much put-upon third voice from behind the bound youma.

A third enemy? That could be bad. She was probably screwed if Jadeite didn't show up soon, even if she was making good progress on loosening the ropes.

"Right," the pig-tailed blonde nodded, and stepped forward, leaning over Mareki. Which, given that the youma had already demonstrated her ability to unleash a stream of wall-denting water from her mouth when she wasn't affected by wards, didn't speak too highly of the girl's intelligence. "Tell us what you have done with Sailor Mercury!"

"Ha! I'll never turn traitor to the Dark Kingdom!" the youma spat immediately. All she needed was to wait until Jadeite showed up to collect today's harvest.

"Are you saying that you are completely useless to us?" the unknown third voice added with a dangerous undertone. "All right then. Sailor Mars, dispose of-"

"Wait! Wait! I'll talk! What do you want to know?"

"Where is Sailor Mercury?" the senshi in the blue fuku repeated.

Mareki recognised that name. "Sailor Mercury? Wait, that's the one Lord Jadeite was bragging about killing all the damn time, isn't it? What do you want with her? Her corpse?"

Sailor Moon sniffled and looked as if she was about to burst into tears. Which she promptly did. "Whaaaaaaa! Sailor Mercury is dead!"

"Get a grip on yourself, Meatball Head. She's clearly lying!" the soldier in the red skirt was now glaring at Mareki, hands on her hips.

"I'm not! That's what he said!"

The female voice whose owner the youma had not yet seen spoke again "Youma! Where is the entrance to the Dark Kingdom?"

Whoops. That was information she wasn't willing to give, for it would get her killed if anyone ever found out "Well, err, how do you intent to make me divulge that?" she asked, dreading the answer.

The clueless looks that the two girls exchanged were truly priceless. Hadn't they thought any about this in advance. Finally, the one in red crossed her arms and glared at the blonde. "This is your stupid plan, you figure something out!"

Mareki heard someone sigh behind her.

"... I knew it was only a matter of time before Lord Jadeite would show up to collect this day's harvest, but when an opportunity presented itself ..."

"Bwahahaha! Stop that! I'm ticklish! Nooo! Bwahaha!" laughing and gasping for breath, the youma fidgeted on her chair, which swayed about dangerously, while her tormentor continued poking at her sides with a finger. Sailor Mars just stood aside, leaning against the wall of crates, and looked highly embarrassed by the whole process. "Spill it!"

"No! Neve- Bwahaha!" One particular violent twitch caused the youma's elbow to jab into Sailor Moon's belly, taking the wind out of the girl's efforts and making her double over in pain and landing in the tied-up youma's lap. In her frantic efforts to get up, she

accidentally brushed off the prayer strips sealing away the monster's powers.

Mareki could feel her blocked powers suddenly returning. She was pretty sure she couldn't slip off the bindings, get out from under the klutz, and get up from the chair fast enough to not eat an attack from Mars or the unknown enemy behind her. Now that her powers were back, she could *float* though.

Sailor Moon eeped when she felt the ground drop away under her feet. Instinctively, she held on to the nearest solid object, which was the youma. Trapping the creature in a hug, she involuntarily restrained her movement and prevented her from using her hands. Nevertheless, Mareki could still attack. She opened her mouth and started shooting fountains of highly-pressurised water at Sailor Mars, who dodged with leaps and bounds, always staying a step ahead of the fountaining splashes. As the youma opened her maw for yet another shot, she suddenly coughed, and then she, Sailor Moon, and the chair dropped simultaneously back to the floor. "Haha- Stop tick - ~cough~ Haha. Bwahaha! ~cough~"

Jedite could be excused for being distracted by the sight of Sailor Moon lying on the ground, draped over one of his youma (in full monster form, no less) and the remains of a chair, encircling the creature with both of her arms and tickling it. Some ropes were apparently involved too. The monster in question was struggling to shake the fukued blond loose, waving her arms, legs and tail, and spurting water from her mouth between fits of laughter. Sailor Moon, for her part, was too scared of what would happen if she stopped tickling to even consider the possibility, and so both she and the youma continued splashing around in the growing puddle as the senshi fought to stay on top.

A roaring fireball bearing down on him reminded Jadeite that there was, in fact, a second enemy in the room. The blast of flame engulfed him completely and seemed to spiral around his form, before revealing a blue-glowing spherical shield as it dissipated. He lowered his raised hand and cocked his head, giving Sailor Mars a smug smile. "Is that all you got?"

Mars' face went red in anger. She dropped into a fighting stance as

Jadeite brought up his own hands, ready for anything he could throw at her. The walls of crates to her left and right collapsing took her therefore by complete surprise, and she was buried under an avalanche of cubes.

"That's number one," Jadeite stated, and then blasted Sailor Moon off his youma with a flick of his wrist. She hurtled past the lamp, which shook in her wake, and collided with yet another stack of crates that wobbled dangerously from the impact. She bounced and landed sprawled out on an pallet, a dazed expression on her face. "Number two."

The dark general strode forward purposefully, savouring every second of this. "It is time to end this, Sailor Moon." His footsteps made loud, regular splashes in the water. Suddenly, a rose struck in his path, showering him with a rain of droplets. "This is also familiar," he commented, looking up at the masked figure that perched on the crates above, cape fluttering behind it majestically.

"Sailor Moon! Don't let a temporary setback get to you! Believe in youself and - GACK!" Being tackled by a wet and sinewy youma didn't fit into Tuxedo Mask's regular cheerleading routine. Both combatants dropped out of sight, and sounds of a battle came from their direction. Jadeite snorted. "Keep up the good work, Mareki." He then turned his full attention back to Sailor Moon, who weakly raised her arm to her forehead.

"Moon Tiara Action!"

The glowing disc didn't make it more than an arms length away from the prone girl before it stopped in mid-air. "Oh please, you tried that move already on me," Jadeite stated with obvious relish. "Have your junk back." At his gesture, the no longer glowing tiara reversed direction and smacked the defender of love and justice in the forehead, sending her back down.

"... it was at this point that things started to go wrong... "

Luna was a blue-black cat, a colour ideal for creeping around unnoticed in a poorly-lit building. As a predatory animal, she was naturally stealthy, and five of her six ends were pointy. Jadeite found

this out the hard way when she appeared seemingly out of nowhere and attached herself to his face. Unfortunately, she was a small cat, and after the initial surprise, he easily batted her away. Thinking this to be the end of it, he returned his attention to Sailor Moon, who was apparently out cold, a trickle of blood running down from her forehead. A thumping noise from his right distracted him. The stupid cat again. It had jumped against the lamp standing here for some reason, and was now running off, onto the pallet his hated enemy was lying on. Crazy animal. The lamp shook, wobbled, and then slowly tipped over. He followed its arc with disinterest. It splashed into the puddle of water on the ground. Which he was standing in. "ARGGGGGHHHH!" The lights in the warehouse flickered once and then went out as fuses were blown.

"... the other enemies were already getting up again, so I disengaged and decided to save Lord Jadeite and the harvested energy instead of going after them, so the mission would still be successful. And here we are."

Jadeite looked up for the first time, bringing the deep scratches running down both of his cheeks into the light. His blond locks were standing on end, and a muscle in his neck twitched involuntarily. "My Queen,I-"

"SILENCE! I have no use for a general who was defeated by a *cat*!" Beryl's eyes filled with a white glow that grew steadily brighter, until it shot at her hapless underling with a flash. Jadeite found himself encased in crystal, his cringing away posture preserved forever. With a negligent wave of the evil queen's orb, prisoner and prison disappeared.

Youma Mareki, who had been backing away quietly, froze like a deer in the headlights when the queen's attention turned back to her. "Now, the energy for our Great Ruler," Beryl demanded.

Curses. Mareki dropped to her knobbly knees, voice apologetic. "My Queen, Jadeite held all the gathered energy bec-"

Beryl's face showed no anger as she disposed of the youma in the same way as the late Jadeite. If any emotion graced her impassive features, it was exasperation. *Imbeciles. I hope Nephrite will do*

better.

Last edited: Aug 12, 2016

Confirmed Suspicions

Originally on 2009-09-26T01:09:00

Ami stared at the plate of food resting on the wooden table in front of her longingly. The mouth-watering aromas rising from it mingled with the alcohol and tobacco smell of the tavern air, and her stomach growled a complaint. So close and yet so far. However, she didn't dare pick up her knife and fork, as her angry, bear-like accuser was towering over her and watching her every move might interpret that as her going for a weapon. Life just wasn't fair. Of all the things to get suspicious about, he had fixated on her hair colour, which was the one thing that had nothing to do with any of the secrets she was trying to hide.

The blue-eyed girl leaned back in her chair as far as it allowed, and looked past the man's still extended pointing finger and straight into his eyes. "I was born with that hair colour," she informed him, her voice calm. Sure, he was much taller than her, had arms that bulged with muscles, and would normally have had the intimidating presence to make her cringe away in fright even in her transformed state: However, she had spent the last two days in the presence of the Horned Reaper. Compared to that murderous thing, an angry strongman just didn't measure up.

"A likely story, " the man barked, sending droplets of spittle flying over his shaggy beard.

"I know a simple way to check if that hair colour is natural," a weasely-looking young man with brown hair quipped from the back of the room, waggling his eyebrows suggestively. Bawdy laughter approved of his statement. A tall blonde woman sitting next to him, who was wearing a metal breast plate even at the breakfast table, smacked his shoulder with a fist, feminine outrage on her face.

"Well, it's true," Ami stated, the faint rosy colour rising to her cheek the only hint that she had overheard the strange man's suggestion. She hoped nobody would actually insist on taking it seriously!

Booted footsteps sounded on the wooden stairs leading down from the inn's upper floor, and a red-headed young man, barely taller than Ami, attempted to defuse the situation."Now, now, now, there's no need for everyone to get all worked up over this." He was wearing a long white robe similar to a monk's habit. A broad, scarlet stole was wrapped around his neck, covering most of his shoulders and upper body, with both ends reaching nearly to the back of his knees.

"Snyder," the black-bearded man towering over Ami replied, not taking his gaze off the girl's blue hair. "You're just an acolyte, not even a fully trained priest!"

"But who better to judge this young woman's spiritual integrity than a man of the Faith, like me?" the newcomer retorted in an unctuous tone of voice, undeterred.

Ami craned her neck to get a better look at the youth who had stepped up to her seat from behind. He looked rather harmless. Soft, chubby features, red hair in a bowl cut, confident smile on his face. He was holding some strip of paper in one hand.

"Tch, Boris. Shame on you for even thinking such a cute young lady could be a dabbler in the dark arts. See, I will simply do this," he said, putting the paper on Ami's head with a flourish before she could react. She immediately felt a strange tingling sensation. Still looking at the hulking brute of a man, the acolyte smirked smugly "See, the ward did nothing. False alarm."

Boris, for his part, nearly tripped over his feet in his haste to back-pedal out of reach. Gasps escaped the throats of the guests of the inn, and chair legs scratched over the floor as the more martially inclined of the breakfast crowd jumped to their feet and unsheathed weapons. Aghast, the barmaid dropped her tray with a scream.

Suddenly the focal point of a wide semi-circle formed by various sharp and pointy implements all pointing directly at her, Ami turned to face the holy-man-in-training, her eyebrows furrowed in an expression of irritated, disbelieving surprise. Her question was more a shaky sqeak "What did you *do*"?

"Oh my." Confronted with the girls eyes, whose irises glowed red like hot embers, Snyder gulped and took a step back. And a second one, just to be on the safe side. Sweating, he raised his hands, palms outwards in a placating gesture. "All right, all right. Stay calm everyone. While there might have been a slight misjudgement on my part, there's no reason to panic. She can't cast any dark magic, as the ward is syphoning off and dissipating all her evil energy. The spillover is what's causing the glow."

Ami still had no idea what had everyone so terrified of her, except that it had something to do with what the robed young man had done. Hearing his explanation, she stealthily tried to summon a coin from her treasury to her hand. The tingling sensation on the back of her head intensified, but the coin arrived underneath her fingers resting on the table, even if it felt colder than usual. Relieved that she still had an easy way to escape, she sent it back.

"So you see, while she appears to indeed be some kind of witch, the situation is under control. As long as the holy ward is on her, we are perfectly safe from her magic! I made that one myself," the acolyte bragged.

With a flash of orange light, the paper strip covered in holy symbols burst into flames and crumbled into ash. The assembled heroes collectively took a step back, and Ami smelled burnt hair.

"It really shows," the tall blonde woman in the back of the crowd muttered in disgust.

"I... shall have to meditate on this," Snyder stammered, before turning tail and dashing for the exit, priestly robes waving behind him.

Eyes back to blue, Ami stared the assembled inn patrons, motionless. They stared back. It was quiet enough in the building to hear a needle drop. Suddenly, the door swung open with a bang, and two panting, portly town guards stepped in, tapping their spears on the ground in an unnecessary attempt to draw attention. "Freeze! You are under arrest, witch!" the lead one shouted imperiously. The effect was slightly ruined by the door rebounding off the wall and hitting him in the shoulder, making the ill-fitting armour on his shield

arm rattle.

In a very Usagi-like moment, Ami met their eyes, looked down at her plate, and raised her gaze again. Giving a hopeful smile, she asked "Would you mind terribly if I finished my meal first?"

Last edited: Aug 13, 2016

Travelling Companions

Originally on 2009-09-27T19:39:00

Ami watched the approaching guards warily, dividing her attention between them and the other armed guests at the inn, who were looking at her with open hostility now. She shrank a bit deeper into her chair, and strongly considered the possibility of fleeing. Getting away would be no problem with the dungeon heart's power, but the people here seemed the cautious type and would start searching for her. Who knew how easy it was for them to accidentally stumble over her dungeon while doing so? Not to mention that being a wanted criminal right of the start would put a damper on her ability to discover a way home. To make matters worse, she didn't know what that ward had done to give her away.

Putting her hands flat on the wooden table on each side of her plate, she addressed the men in armour directly "Wait! I don't want any trouble! What am I being arrested for anyway?"

"You're an evil witch, all glowy red eyes and weird looking, too!" Boris, the black bearded Neanderthal, as she had come to think of him, spat furiously. "An' probably a Keeper spy too," he accused.

Ami's eyebrows shot upward. Glowing red eyes? But she had blue eyes! When was the last time she had looked into a mirror, anyway? "You think I'm evil just because I look differently?"

"No, it's perfectly normal for people's eyes to start blazing with the fires of hell when in contact with a holy ward," the tall blonde woman wearing a breastplate that Ami had noticed earlier stated, deadpan. A few of the other heroes chuckled, but Boris just looked confused.

"But I haven't done anything!" Ami whined. She checked her access to the dungeon heart. Yes, still working.

The taller of the town guards approached her, spear held up cautiously, and heavy mail boots clanking. "That will be for the judge to decide!"

"I'll get a trial?" Ami asked, sounding hopeful.

"Waste of time if you ask me," Boris growled. Everybody ignored him.

"Obviously. We aren't monsters like your associates in the Underworld," the smaller and more portly of the guards retorted. Chains were rattling in his hands.

"Fine then," Ami lowered her head in defeat. If she got a chance to explain, then she could maybe convince these people that she was innocent. In any case, she would learn more about this world, and running from the law was something that felt wrong for a champion of love and justice. Besides, she could just teleport away if things went awry. All going along would really cost her was some time and her food, she noted sourly.She felt one of the guards chain her wrists together behind her back before she was roughly pulled to her feet. The other patrons relaxed their postures when it became clear that she wasn't going to put up a fight. The innkeeper seemed especially relieved that the situation hadn't degenerated into a furniture-destroying battle.

"Good to see that you are reasonable," the lead guard noted. Louder, he continued "and someone get that Acolyte back in here! I don't want to end up as a toad if she decides to change her mind."

"No need, no need! I am already here!" Snyder strutted in through the open door, a large earthen amphora held in his arms. "Divine inspiration has struck, revealing to me why the previous ward failed through no fault of my own!" Ami noted that the sceptical glances of the others matched her own. The short man in priestly robes was walking toward her now, a wide grin on his face.

"The reason is rather simple, if not obvious. This girl," he pointed at Ami, who stood between the two guards towering over her, wrapped in her dark red cloak, "must be hiding some kind of heavily enchanted item on her person that wasn't deactivated when her own power was bound!"

The guards shuffled further away from the blue-haired girl upon hearing these words, all the while trying to appear as if they weren't

moving. Their pay wasn't high enough to deal with evil sorcery.

"But never fear! I have already retrieved the appropriate countermeasures from my stash!" he lifted the amphora he was holding. Something inside made sloshing noises.

Ami didn't like where this was going, and took a step away from him until her back touched the bar counter.

"This holy water has been especially blessed and enchanted by the Abbot himself! A single splash will neutralise all magical items on somebody's person!" With that, he pulled back his arms, as if to swing the container in the prisoner's direction.

Ami paled. Neutralise all magical items? What about her precious, currently inactive visor?

The innkeeper was about to protest that one couldn't just pour water all over his floor, but it was already too late. A spray of transparent liquid shot from the amphora and sparkled in the air before it struck Ami's face and drenched her clothes. She cringed away, but the effects were near instantaneous. Her lithe form was surrounded by a curtain of green motes and pale blue streamers of light for a moment, and suddenly she felt a draft on her wet skin. Had she had more time to consider the situation, she would have realised that her cloak and senshi uniform were just as much magical creations as her visor.

"Eeeeek!" Ami dropped to the ground, hid under the table, and pulled her knees to her chest to protect her modesty as well as possibly within circumstances, which, given that her wrists were still tied behind her back, wasn't all that much.

The surprised silence within the inn was quickly broken by jeers and whistles. "Well, at least we learned that her hair colour is indeed natural," the same man with rodent-like features as before drawled.

Ami's face was red as a tomato as she cowered under the table. Enough was enough. "SHABON SPRAY!" Getting the spell off with her limbs restrained was by no means easy, but fortunately it wasn't something that had to be aimed. Obscuring fog spread through the

inn, performing its tasks of hiding her from leering gazes. The drop in temperature was rather uncomfortable in her current state of undress, though. Around her, the voices turned surprised and frightened, and she could hear people bumping into each other as they tried to move in the haze.

"Pigs," the tall blond woman muttered as she set down her cup of tea, in order to better punch her companion in the shoulder.

"Ouch! Stop being so jealous, Cathy," he complained, but the woman had already stood up and walked into the mist, becoming a thin silhouette before disappearing completely. He heard a scuffle, as if from far away, despite the fact that it was happening in the same room."Unhand me, woman! What are you doing? I am an upstanding man of the faith, and- Ow!" Something heavy clattered to the floor, making gurgling noises.

Cathy squatted down and peered into the surrounding greyish-white mist, slowly advancing toward the location where the young sorceress had last been. Someone bumped into her, making her armour ring, but she ignored the collision. That arching black form had to be the table. Two red pinpricks of light glowered at her from underneath. The correct one, then. The long-haired blonde held out a bundle of cloth in front of her. "I have clothes. Thought you might want them."

Ami let the stranger approach, taking note in passing of the sword at the woman's hips. The straight scar running down her right cheek indicated that she had been in battles and probably knew how to use it. The prospect of clothes was mighty attractive at the moment though, so Ami allowed her to approach and slip the robes over her head. The coarse fabric tingled uncomfortably.

"Now that you are decent, do something about your spell." It wasn't a request, Ami realised. There was steel in the long-haired warrior's voice. Well, it had already served its purpose, so she stopped maintaining it.

Once visibility was restored, the woman hauled Ami to her feet, and she could see the unintended consequences of her spell. Tables had been overturned in the heroes' haste to take more defensible

positions. She was at the receiving end of many a glare, and averted her eyes, blushing. The two town guards were huddling in a corner, eyes closed tightly, and holding each other as they shivered in dread. Next to the staircase, that annoying monk Snyder lay on the floor, rubbing a bump on his head, and wearing only nightshirt-like underclothes. Ami looked down at herself. Yes, she was wearing his white-and red garb. She turned her head upwards and sideways to give the tall woman a questioning glance.

"He's the moron who destroyed yours. Besides, the two of you are nearly the same size," she replied dispassionately.

"Hey! Hey now! Don't go casting aspersions on my intelligence! This is all her fault! Who wears nothing but conjured clothes? That's just not done!" the redhead defended himself, already getting up after running into the wall during the mist episode. Ami gave him a nasty glare, eyes momentarily flashing red. He was the fool responsible for embarrassing her like this!

"Ahem. It just isn't seemly for a man of my position to be seen like this. We shall continue this talk later," he sputtered with as much dignity as he could muster, all the while backing up towards the stairs, then turning tail and fleeing up to his room.

"Snyder," the woman sighed, making the word sound like a curse. "I wish Jered had hired an experienced priest instead."

A few hours later, Ami found herself on the back of a horse, sitting in front of the woman - Cathy, she now knew - who had saved her from terminal embarrassment. Currently, she was also saving her from falling off the horse. Ami had never learned to ride, and having her wrists tied together was not improving her balance. To her right was Snyder on a temperamental brown and white spotted mare. The acolyte had replaced his robes - Ami was still wearing his old ones, though her chains had been loosened once so she could put on the garment properly. He had also put a new ward on her, this one etched into a golden necklace that wouldn't burst into flames. To her, it felt about as effective as the paper one, and it also made her eyes glow red eerily, as she had checked by watching her reflection in a pond. That had been deeply unsettling. Currently, the red-headed acolyte was trying (and failing) to start up a conversation

with Cathy.

In front of her was that black-bearded brute, Boris, sitting on a horse that he made look like a pony with his size. Strapped to the barbarian's back was a massive double-bladed axe, and he was busily complaining to the party leader Jered, the weasely-looking man who had been making all those insinuating comments back at the inn, about having to 'bring the horrid little witch' along.

Jered shook his wavy brown hair and answered "We were going to the capital anyway. The payment the mayor promised us for this prisoner transport more than makes up for the inconvenience. Now give it a rest already."

The ride really was less interesting than Ami had expected, at least after she had gotten the hang of staying on the horse. After the first couple of sunlit fields, pastures, and forests, the sight of more became mere routine. She distracted herself by checking up on her dungeon, which became easier and easier with practice. By now, she could actually see whatever she was concentrating on. She was also ordering the imps to drive more exploration shafts into the surrounding terrain. When a black-carapaced beetle wandered out of the dust, she almost dropped off the horse in surprise . It was absolutely enormous, bigger than a sheep even! She had sweated nervously when the thing had ignored her imps and made a beeline straight for her dungeon heart. Those mandibles looked awfully sharp. When it had gotten close enough that it risked falling into the beating membrane, she had considered using the Reaper to deal with the problem, but after a moment, she felt something like a tug on her mind, a request for approval. She granted it, and the beetle walked off, deeper into her dungeon, making a cheerful buzzing sound with its wings.

Aware that she had just attracted her first minion - she wasn't sure enough about the Reaper's loyalties to consider him a minion - she assigned a place for it to live. Apparently satisfied with her choice, the critter started building a nest in the narrow, damp crevasse. Still shaken by the scare of something just wandering in and toward her dungeon heart, Ami drew up some defensive measures. Soon, her imps were busy retrofitting the dungeon with rockfalls, trap doors, collapsible ceilings, and the likes. She also had a special plan for

her dungeon heart chamber, but before she could put it into motion, she felt an insistent pull from her library. The crystal ball was active. That Nicodemus guy must have her books ready, and she wasn't anywhere near to conclude the transaction! What to do? She couldn't just pop away, because then she wouldn't be able to return. Besides, there would inevitably be questions, and she wasn't willing to throw away this opportunity yet after all she had gone through. Well, she had another option.

Hoping that she wasn't making a big mistake, she snatched the horned demon off his throne and dropped him in the library, then shoved him gently in the direction of the glowing communication device when he looked around in confusion. When a stack of gold coins landed on the desk next to the crystal ball, he finally seemed to get the idea. There was a lot more growling and threatening scythe-waving involved than she was happy with, but in the end, a rectangular green glow appeared on one of the empty shelves, slowly solidifying into a heavy tome.

Ami felt giddy. Finally a clue to getting home! Now, if only she was in a situation where she could use the book. Maybe she could still read it if she got an imp to turn the pages for her?

"KEEPER! Your traps are malfunctioning!" the angry voice of the reaper echoed through the dungeon, loud enough to attract her attention. A soft giggle escaped her lips when she found him. The red demon's scythe was spanning the length of a pit, blade resting on one side, end of the grip on the other. Holding onto the horizontal weapon's haft was the Reaper, dangling precariously over the hole that had been hidden underneath the trapdoor. What was he talking about? It had worked as intended, though she'd have to remember to make it wider in the future. After moving the demon to safe ground, she plopped an imp down next to him, its three-fingered hands full of mud. At her direction, the illiterate creature started to draw on the wall.

The Horned Reaper narrowed his yellow eyes as the imp started to write words in huge letters on the bare stone. The handwriting was atrocious but legible. In disbelief, he snorted "That has to be the most ridiculous method of communication devised yet. To answer your question: the trap is clearly malfunctioning because it doesn't

distinguish between allied and hostile creatures!"

The imp scribbled some more. The reaper read. "What do you mean, you don't know how to make those? Do you expect your creatures to remember where all of them are all the time?"

The imp was slowly running out of mud. "No, frankly, the fact that most of them are imp-operated doesn't reassure me at all. Do you have any idea how malicious the little freaks are, given half a chance? No, of course you don't. Why in darkness' name are you communicating like this anyway instead of just talking?"

"Damn it Boris! Cease and desist! I'm done talking about this! We are taking her along, and that's final!" Jered finally lost his temper with his huge companion. "You have been at this since we left, and it's nearly midday now! It's not as if she's making any trouble!" he fingered the bandoleer of daggers strapped over his green shirt, fingers twitching as if yearning to use them.

Cathy urged her ride to go faster, until she was riding next to the brown-haired man, and leaned over the gap separating them. "About that. Did you drug her or something?" she whispered, indicating the girl whom her left arm was half wrapped around, "she has been giggling at odd times and doesn't seem to register what's right in front of her eyes."

Last edited: Sep 9, 2016

Ambush

Originally on 2009-09-29T21:38:00

It was lunchtime, and the group had moved off the road and onto a tiny hill where the bedrock poked through the grass, forming several more-or-less flat schist slabs. A crooked pine swayed in the wind, casting shadow over the impromptu picnic site. The horses were grazing a bit further down the hill, tied to one of the larger boulders.

Ami chewed on a piece of bread. It was a bit dry, but since this was her first piece of food in a long time, it tasted heavenly to her. All too soon, the delicious morsel was swallowed, and she turned to the right, where the red-headed acolyte was sitting next to her. As the group had unanimously decided (she hadn't been asked) to not untie her, the task of feeding her had fallen to him. It was all quite awkward in her opinion. He held out another piece of bred, hand somewhat shaky.

"I don't bite, you know." Ami stated, with a friendly smile. It came across as rather more hungry than she intended, and Snyder didn't look particularly reassured.

"Well, she looks lucid enough now," Cathy commented to the brown-haired man sitting cross-legged next to her, and shifted to use his shoulder as a backrest.

"I tell you, she's up to no good," Boris, the black-haired, black-bearded bear of a man growled with his mouth full, glowering at the girl in question from his spot across the tablecloth. "We shouldn't be wasting our provisions on her!"

Ami shot him a nasty glare, then resumed devouring the offered food at a pace that made the priest-in-training who was feeding her fear for his fingers.

"Don't mind him, he used to live on Avatar Island as a child," the blonde Cathy stated, as if that would explain everything. "He hates everything associated with dark magic."

"Avatar Island?" Ami paused for a moment in her feeding frenzy to give the other woman her undivided attention.

"Right, you say you aren't from around here. Avatar Island used to be one of the most peaceful places in the world, ruled over by the paragon of light himself, the Avatar. After Keeper Mukrezar was done rampaging all over it, the land had become a soot-covered outpost of hell instead. Boris arrived here as a young orphan on one of the last ships that got out."

"Oh." Ami re-considered the hulking brute in light of this new information, a hint of pity slipping on her features. Noticing her gaze, the man bared his teeth at her in anger.

Quickly averting her eyes, Ami returned to her conversation with the blue-clad swordswoman. "This Keeper, did he attack other places too?"

Cathy smiled humourlessly "No, the bastard was an accomplished tactician, but sucked at long-term planning. Once he couldn't get any more resources by plundering adjacent territories, his empire went down in an orgy of violence and cannibalism. Rumour has him ending up in a stewing pot. Serves him right, if you ask me. "Sombrely, she added "The land is still ruined and worthless, though, and nothing lives there." Narrowing her eyes at Ami, she continued "You had best keep in mind that everything Keepers touch comes to ruin. If you were seeking employment with one, forget about it!"

Ami nearly choked. "I wasn't planning on that!" she protested, entirely truthfully. "All I want is to find a way back home. I'm not evil!"

"Your awful red eyes say differently," Boris interjected.

"You do have quite the healthy appetite for a girl of your size, Mercury." Jered addressed the white-and-red robed senshi directly, cutting off his barbarian companion.

Gulping down the latest bit of half-chewed bread, Ami blushed slightly. "Sorry. I don't usually eat like this, I'm just really famished."

"Oh? And here I was thinking that it was because you need to replenish your mana supply. Those wards *are* syphoning off an awful lot of power." He pointed at the golden amulet around her neck. "Quite unusual for one so young to not have run out yet." A calculating gleam appeared in his brown eyes. "A sure sign of a remarkable amount of training. What is it you can do, aside from that little fog you demonstrated this morning?"

Ami hesitated. What could she tell them safely? "Well, you have already seen the fog. I also have a spell that conjures ice." With a sidewards glance at Snyder, she added "I also used to have a magical item that let me find out how most things work."

Jered looked at her for a long time, scratching his chin. "I cannot shake the feeling that you are leaving out quite a lot of things."

"Indeed, indeed. Elemental magic alone would not cause that much corruption," Snyder chimed in. He wagged a finger chidingly at Ami. "You had better confess, lying at the trial will just make things worse for you. The priests are very good at detecting falsehoods."

Ami pressed her lips together into a thin line as she considered her options. Telling them about being a Dungeon Keeper was right out. Boris would probably try to split her in half with that axe of his on principle. Better change the topic. "Err, about that trial. What kind of outcome can I expect from that?"

"Well, that would depend on your crimes. If you are indeed as innocent as you pretend to be, and considering your age, you would almost certainly be placed with guardians charged to make you abandon your dark ways. Maybe an apprenticeship with an experienced wizard, or a within an abbey," the acolyte explained. "Provided that they think you are trustworthy, which they might not, if you continue being so secretive. Maybe you will want to give a more extensive list of your abilities?"

Ami hung her head. In a hushed voice, she stuttered "I- I might know the one or other Necromantic spell."

As expected, Boris' face became a mask of disgust. Cathy narrowed her eyes slightly, and Jered seemed unsurprised.

"Necromancy? Whatever did you learn that for? That is really dark stuff, not to mention somewhat useless in most situations." Snyder seemed more upset by the choice of subject, than the black magic itself. He shook his head disapprovingly. making his bowl cut whip around.

Telling them that a demon made her do it wasn't going to improve their opinion of her, Ami thought. "I was hurt, and the book had a healing spell, so I wanted to use it. After that I kind of just kept reading," she laughed nervously.

Jered raised an eyebrow. "You actually used it on yourself, as a rank amateur? You are lucky that you didn't end up with side effects that make your hair look normal."

"Eh?" another reason to be angry at the Reaper. On the other hand, he might not have known. He didn't strike her as the intellectual type, loathsome violent beast that he was.

Having finished lunch, the group was back on the road towards the capital. Ami was riding with Snyder now on the acolyte's spotted mare, as Cathy didn't want to strain her horse by making it carry two people for too long. Sitting so close in front of a boy, who had to put his arms around her in order to hold the reins, was a new and awkward experience for the girl. Usagi and Rei would probably have found it romantic, but she found the fact that she still had her wrists tied behind her back an inconvenience. She didn't want to accidentally touch something she shouldn't. So far, she had been blushing most of the time, especially when the movement of the mount shifted the riders around, and the red-haired man's hands brushed against her upper thigh. Not on purpose, she hoped. Were holy men in this world supposed to be chaste? For all his bluster, the acolyte seemed to be just as embarrassed by the situation as she was, fidgeting more than usual and being uncharacteristically quiet.

A bit ahead of the rest of the group, Jered and Cathy were having a private discussion.

"...you think she's on the level?" the long-haired swordswoman asked, keeping her voice down.

"Not a chance." Jered shook his head emphatically. "Unless she keeps her money in very strange places, she did not have any on her at the inn. Despite that, she clearly had enough to pay for the meal earlier. She clearly has some abilities she hasn't told us about. Still, there's something plain wrong about her. Just look." He discretely turned his head. The suspected witch was sitting on the horse, looking deceptively innocent in the borrowed acolyte robes, until one noticed her red eyes, which were darting to the left and right regularly, never focusing on anything in particular.

For her part, Ami was unaware of their scrutiny, as her mind's eye was currently in her dungeon, flitting over the pages of her newest acquisition. From time to time, an imp darted in to turn a page of the heavy tome. Reading this way was slightly nauseating, similar to riding in a car and reading in the same time, but it was also distracting her from the warm body her back was touching. Nothing in the dungeon required her immediate attention. One of her imps was scouting the beetle tunnels, attracting more of the insects as it went, but so far, it hadn't found anything interesting yet.

"I see what you mean," Cathy agreed with a nod. "Think she's a Keeper spy, after all?"

The wavy-haired man shook his head in the negative. "Not a Keeper spy, no. She's too peculiar-looking. A Keeper's runaway kid, though? Possibly."

His companion sat up straighter with a start, eyes widening, before looking at Ami from the corners of her eye "Are you serious?"

"That, or maybe some powerful warlock's daughter. Let's see," he held up his hand, extending a finger. "One. She is saturated with dark magic and looks weird, indicating that she may not be entirely human. Two. Someone has to have taught her magic, because freezing is an advanced spell. Three. With the way she acted around horses, she must have never been around them before. Four. She acts repulsed by little everyday inconveniences, such as manure on the road. Five. She wasn't carrying a single weapon, so she must come from a place where she was well-protected. Six," here his expression turned a little greedy, "she paid with an unknown gold coin, where a few coppers would have sufficed. And seven, all her

clothes were conjured. Not many people can waste mana that thoughtlessly."

Cathy nodded, examining the information from all angles. "So you think she's some kind of sheltered princess from the Underworld, out on a bout of teenage rebellion?"

"More or less."

"I'd have expected someone like that to be brattier," the woman voiced the only immediately obvious problem she could find with the theory."

"Would you act bratty if you were tied up and alone with a group of four armed strangers? Wait, don't answer that," he added with a mock sigh as her lips parted in a grin.

"Should we mention your conclusions to the authorities, then?"

"Heavens no! Think what a valuable bargaining chip she could be if we handle this right!" he grinned and rubbed his hands together, "Besides, she seems to have access to daddy's stash, so..."

The blonde brushed long strains of hair out of her face so she could properly massage her temples."You are incorrigible. What about Boris? He isn't going to like this," she pointed her thumb at the brooding giant trailing behind the party on his much stressed horse.

He waved away her concern. "He's hired help, just like the acolyte. He will simply have to set aside his personal feelings on the matter."

The countryside had turned to woodland, and the road had become narrow, winding between ancient trees that had been standing here long before its first cobbles had been set. Ami welcomed the shelter from the suffocating heat. The air felt as if there would be thunderstorms later in the day, but for now, specks of sunlight were dancing over the leaf covered ground whenever the wind picked up and shook the leafy canopy. While the red stole covering most of her upper body was causing her some discomfort with its warmth, she was glad to have it. With the way she was sweating, being covered only with the white fabric of her robe would be more revealing than

she was comfortable with. She shifted uncomfortably in her seat. Her arms were falling asleep.

A whistling sound shook her out of her thoughts, followed by a wet thud. Suddenly, she found herself flung through the air as the horse reared up, letting out a pained whinny, and then galloped off, an arrow sticking out of its right flank. With a thump, she landed on her back, more softly than expected. Underneath her, Snyder let out a groan and stirred weakly. Ami, rolled off him, feeling slightly guilty. Even if she didn't look it, she was still in her senshi form, and thus tougher than him. From all around came the noise of weapons being drawn. Jered was shouting commands, and from somewhere in the bushes, she heard a high-pitched, angry voice.

"Gamuk stupid! Not fire yet!"

A short, green creature with long, triangular ears nearly as big as its face, was emerging from the bushes, waving a dagger. The blue-haired girl struggled to get up from the mossy forest ground, slowed down by being unable to use her hands.

"Fucking goblins," Cathy swore as she slid off her mount, an arrow pinging off her breastplate. "Archers in the trees!"

"On it!" Jered replied, loosening a dagger with a twirl of his wrist. A short humanoid figure with the weapon embedded in its chest screamed as it fell off its perch on an oak. More goblins were appearing from the bushes, but Ami had no time to pay attention to them. The first goblin was moving toward her, sensing easy prey. Behind her, the acolyte let out a whimper of pain, but didn't get up.

"RAHRRG!" Boris had gotten off his horse, a feat easily accomplished by stretching his legs and standing up, and was charging at the diminutive attackers, his double-headed axe held high. The three small arrows sticking out of his own leather armour didn't seem to slow him down.

Ami took a step backward as the goblin approached, its piecemeal armour dangling. It got a good look at her face and hesitated, seemingly taken aback by the red-glowing stare. Not one to let an opportunity like that pass, Ami took advantage of its distraction, and

brought her foot around in a spinning kick. The child-sized creature was caught in the head and went tumbling, flipping over once as it skidded over the ground. Its horned helmet went flying, its unmoving owner in the dirt.

She sprinted back to Snyder's side. "I need some help here!" The acolyte was still writhing on the ground helplessly. Looking around, she saw that the others weren't doing so hot, either. Cathy was slowly moving in Ami's direction, her long sword flickering about in precise arcs as she parried blows from three attackers. The weapon's point was covered in red. Boris, for his part, was surrounded by a circle of the hunched-over creatures, who gave him a wide berth. Like a pack of hyenas, they capered around him, darting in for his legs whenever his back was turned, and retreating when he whirled around, axe moving in wide swings. She noticed two small, limp forms at his feet, but it was clear to her that the goblins would soon overwhelm him.

Ami spotted Jered making a rolling jump that carried him through the legs of his horse, who was stomping around and kicking up dust in fright. The manoeuvre bought him some time from the band of goblins that had been ganging up on him, and he looked around frantically, nearly giving himself whiplash as he searched for an escape route. A moment later, he took a decision and dashed in her direction, head held low. A goblin trying to get in his way found his route blocked by a thrown dagger whistling past. Ami hoped that the brown-haired man would remove her chains, but instead she felt herself pulled toward him roughly, and then used as a human shield.

"EVERYONE STOP!" Jered shouted, causing an interruption in the melee as the combatants turned to look at him. Incidentally, this also postponed the meeting between the blue-haired girl's heel and his crotch.

"GOBLINS! Harm this girl, and you will draw the direct and *personal* ire of a Keeper!" he shouted. Cathy gave him a look that could only mean *THAT's your plan?*

Ami's heart skipped a beat. They knew? But how? Should she flee? No, she couldn't just abandon them here to die. They weren't bad people, from what she had seen so far.

The green skinned attackers also froze, but for a different reason, interrupting their attack to take a closer look at the figure in white robes.

"You dumb! Girl dressed like priest!" one pointed out suspiciously.

Another whacked it on the helmet with a club. "Dolt! She's got *them* eyes!" A chorus of awed exclamations followed, interrupted by the smallest goblin. "She still look scrawny."

"She kick Dub far," another chimed in, pointing at the unconscious body lying with its face in the dirt a few metres away from Ami.

"She prisoner," the second goblin added. "Not with stupid ones!"

"What we do? What we do?" a few others yapped.

Last edited: Aug 13, 2016

A Poor Plan

Originally on 2009-10-02T00:20:00

Ami watched the goblins hesitate, shaking their weapons and distorting their ugly faces into grimaces as they bickered among themselves. She hoped the plan would work, even though the way Jered was holding her up and ducking behind her was most displeasing. If she got the chance, she'd tell him what she thought about *that* later.

"Is bad plan!"

"Is not!"

"Is TOO!" the shouting goblin finally managed to win the debate, by virtue of grabbing his opponent by his long, triangular right ear and swinging him around until his face slammed into the knotty bark of the nearest tree. The little humanoid took a more rigid posture, puffing out its black-armoured chest, and clapping its hands together as if to clean them. "We kill big ones, leave red-eye alone. She rescued, maybe get reward!"

The other goblins cheered. This made sense to them.

"Oh good going Jered. Great negotiation skills." Cathy had made her way over to where Ami and Jered were, and was protecting his back, sword held ready. At her feet lay the injured acolyte, groaning softly from time to time, forming a mound that would serve as a minor obstacle to the small attackers. The only one still separated from the group was Boris, who had managed to position a large pine to his back and was glowering at the goblins surrounding him with the fury of a black bear.

"Not so fast," Jered's voice went steely, and Ami suddenly felt something cold against her throat. "Do you really think the Keeper would care whose fault it is she got hurt, rather than destroying everyone involved? Back off!"

Obviously I would! Ami thought, taken aback by this turn of events. Jered didn't make much sense. Could she get out of this fast enough if she tried? Feeling that dagger against the skin of her neck was frightening.

The goblins hesitated in their advance and let out some cranky growls, looking at each other questioningly. Finally, the one that had disagreed before croaked with a maniacal gleam in his blood- shot eyes "What odds that Keeper even watching? We kill all, we loot, we go away!"

Uh oh, this was bad. Ami could feel the brown-haired man tighten his grip on her, and didn't dare gulp for fear of cutting herself on the sharp steel. *Well, my secret is out anyway, so...*She considered her options. Reaper? Inappropriate, and she didn't want to set him free. Beetle? She mentally snatched the biggest, meanest looking of her chitinous minions and pulled it in her direction, then felt something wrench it from her immaterial grasp at the borders of her territory. The bug was hurled forward on its trajectory until it spread its wings and arrested its fall with an agitated buzzing sound. *What the... ? Ack, goblins getting close, try again, worry later!*

Everything froze when suddenly, the lead goblin went down under the weight of a bug-eyed creature just a little smaller than himself that had appeared out of mid-air. The imp gave a squeal of glee as it stood up and did a little jig on the hapless attacker's head.

"Holy crap!" the blonde swordswoman boggled, staring at the creature with wide, blue eyes. "You were actually right about her!"

"Don't panic now," Jered commanded. "Nothing has changed! Now you know we aren't bluffing!" he added, a hint of hysteria vibrating in his voice. He hadn't actually expected a Keeper to be scrying on them. Had anyone paid attention to Boris, they would have seen that the black-bearded giant was scowling fiercely at the newcomer, and then transferring this scowl to Ami. The imp itself had turned its huge black eyes on Jered and bared its teeth at the rodent-featured man. It let out an outraged squeak and started advancing, waving its pick back and forth threateningly.

"Keeper is watching!" the goblins cried. "We stuck again now! What

we do?"

"Control your creature, Keeper," Jered hissed as the imp approached. With luck, he and his team would still get out of this situation unharmed. Well, mostly unharmed, he added mentally considering the arrows sticking out of his barbarian ally and the slumped form of Snyder on the ground. It was nice to have the value of the girl confirmed though. As Ami didn't think her health would be served by the man holding a knife to her throat having to fend of an irate minion, she ordered the imp to stop.

The goblins were still discussing the recent development.

"...get Gold! Keepers pay good!"

"Dungeon not here! How we find?"

While the little green things argued, Cathy was kneeling down next to the fallen priest-in-training, checking up on his injuries, looking grim. Ami, listening in to the goblin chatter, realised that they wanted to find employment with her. While the idea of having a tribe of bloodthirsty little savages to go with her bloodthirsty huge savage wasn't entirely to her taste, she figured that they'd at least be out of the way and not endangering any innocents in her dungeon. It wasn't as if she didn't have enough room for them. She craned her neck to get away from the blade, and said "Go with the imp."

The heroes looked at her, as if surprised she had spoken up. The goblins just looked clueless and suspicious. "How we know this not trap?"

Ami figured that she could safely transport one imp plus whatever cargo it was carrying. Fortunately, goblins were small. Shrugging its shoulders at its strange new orders, the servile minion scuttled over to the unconscious warrior it had landed on, and unceremoniously stuffed him into its pack. With a high-pitched groan, it strained to lift the body, which was still hanging half out of the sack, and disappeared. The worried glances of his companions turned to angry mutters. Back at the dungeon heart, the imp reappeared, and dumped the unconscious body on the ground as if it was garbage.

Attracted by the noise, the Horned Reaper stomped over. He snorted in disdain upon spotting the sprawled-out form. "Wake up, trash!" A kick from his huge hoofed bounced the creature off of one of the pillars of the heart's superstructure. It did the job.

"Who dare kick Gruk? You die!" the goblin pulled with two hands at its helmet that had once been a cooking pot, now stuck over his eyes from having an imp drop on it. With a plop, the piece of armour was finally dislodged, and the belligerent face of the huge-eared being appeared. He looked at the legs of his tormentor. Then he looked up. And up. The red-skinned demon grinned toothily down at him, watching in amusement as the green creature's face flinched away. "Gruk think feeling mercyful today," it stammered.

"If you are going to join the Keeper, get it over with. I don't have all day!" the Reaper growled, twirling his scythe in anticipation.

"Gruk is joining!" the goblin quickly agreed, scampering toward the heart and conveying its wish to join the Keeper. Nearly as soon as he was done, an imp sneaked up on him from behind, pounced, and put its bag over his head and upper torso. Ami transferred the two of them back to the battlefield, where her disoriented new underling struggled to get out of the pack, while the imp just giggled to itself.

"Tell them that it's safe to go!" Ami demanded.

Gruk freed himself and surveyed his surroundings, disoriented. "Not completely safe," he finally concluded. "Gruk got kicked by giant red monster. Keeper hiring, though."

A little cheer accompanied that announcement. A moment later, the imp was buried under a heap of goblins, all vying to be the first to be ferried over to the dungeon. Huh. Ami hadn't expected that being hired by a dungeon keeper was so coveted. Looking closer, she noted that the small monsters *did* look somewhat starved, in as far as she could judge. The waylaying business must have been going poorly, then.

One by one, the goblins disappeared, which left Ami with the travelling group only. Jered let out a long-held breath and let go of her. "Well, that was certainly interesting. Cathy, how's Snyder

doing?"

The blonde looked up, face pale. "Not good. He's coughing up blood. I think a broken rib punctured his lung. At this rate, he's not going to make it."

"Damn. Accursed goblins. And he's our healer, too. Can you bandage him up?"

"I can help!" Ami shouted, stepping closer. While the young man had caused her much embarrassment so far, he didn't deserve to die. "Just get those chains off me!"

"Forget about that!" Boris roared, stomping towards her. "We have seen the witch is in cahoots with a Keeper! We should string her up right now!"

Ami backed away from the angry barbarian. *They still think I'm a witch? But... did Jered simply bluff and I made a huge mistake?* She'd fret over that later. She turned to Cathy, asking imploringly. "Please, let me help! He doesn't have to die just because you don't trust me! I won't do anything!" She briefly considered disappearing the chains to the dungeons - they were on her, so they were *hers* - but didn't trust her control enough to do so without flaying her skin from her arms too. Boris was still advancing on her, and Jered was kneading his chin, considering his options.

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Intra-Party Conflict

Originally on 2009-10-03T20:09:00

Ami backed away as the huge form of Boris advanced on her. The man's face was a mask of fury, bare teeth gleaming within a thicket of black beard hairs. The barbarian still had a few goblin arrows sticking out of his breastplate and arms, but they looked more like needles compared to his bulk. While the wounds were bleeding, they didn't seem to slow him down in any useful way.

"Boris! Cut it out!" Jered shouted, trying to get at least a semblance of control back over the situation. In response, the giant tightened his grip on the haft of his axe and drew the massive weapon back for a swing at the blue-haired girl in front of him.

Long experience dodging youma attacks prevented Ami from freezing up in fear. Instead, she dodged by reflex. Boris, even in his berserk rage, felt a pang of surprise when the girl, only half his size, got out of the way by *jumping over his head and landing behind him*. The physical abilities of her senshi form didn't just go away because she was dressed unconventionally for the job.

"Told you she's a monster!" the towering man roared, spinning in place to face the girl, who was rapidly putting distance between herself and her attacker. Just as he lunged after her, he felt Jered tackle his legs from behind. He fell like a tree, striking the ground with an earth-shaking impact. The more limber brown haired man quickly climbed on his back and sat down on his back.

"I ordered you to stop you barbarian oaf! Do you want a bounty on your head if something happens to the girl?" *Crap. This can't have been good for his injuries. I can't afford to lose two mercenaries. Why doesn't the idiot just listen?* Boris reared up under him, making the smaller man nearly lose his hold on him. The bear-like man was foaming at the mouth and letting out unarticulated howls of rage, all the while clawing at the pest on his back that was holding him down.

"He's lost it completely!" Jered considered his options. Normally, if

he wanted to take down a target in this position, he'd just use his daggers. Unfortunately, he didn't want to kill his subordinate. Biting his teeth together, he slipped both arms around the berserker's neck and put pressure on his throat. *Damn giant has a neck thick as a steer. Damn, I hope the kid appreciates what I'm doing for her!* Without his hands free to defend himself, he was taking his shares of bruises. Jered made a pained 'oof' sound when Boris managed to roll on him, but didn't loosen his grip.

Ami watched in horrified fascination as the two men struggled among the fallen leaves, and Boris' face went more and more blue. She gave their battle a wide berth as she stepped around the two fighters, moving closer to the blonde swordswoman, who was trying to tend to Snyder's injuries. She had rolled the short red-headed acolyte on his back, making him sit up leaning against a tree, and was in the process of stripping off his robe to get a better idea of what, if anything, she could do to help him. A weak trickle of dark red blood was dribbling down from the not-yet-a-priest's chin.

"Please let me use a healing spell on him," Ami pleaded. "I can't possibly make things worse!"

Cathy looked at her, undecided. "Jered?"

"Don't. For all we know, the Keeper will whisk her away the moment that amulet is removed, and where would that leave us?" the man managed to gasp out, still struggling with the much larger Boris.

Ami was beginning to get angry. "You would just leave your companion to die because you are worried about not getting your reward for turning me in? You make me sick!"

"Oh, put a lid on it! We have no reason to believe tha- CRAP!" the distraction had allowed Boris to get a good grip on the back of Jered's green shirt, and with a mighty heave, the brute lifted the weasel-featured man forward, over his head, and slammed him into the forest floor. Wheezing, the giant swayed as he pulled himself to his feet, picking up his axe in the process. Eyes wild, he looked around for his quarry, found it, and thundered toward Ami.

The senshi wisely made a run for it. Getting to far away from the

others wasn't an option, but maybe if she took higher ground? Ami looked at the trees rushing past, annoyed at the undergrowth tearing at the white robes she was wearing. Ah, there was a particularly thick tree trunk that forked not too high up. Ami aimed for the uneven platform formed by the two crooked branches and jumped, seeing the leaf and brushwood-covered ground shrink away under her. With any luck, she'd be able to land safely even with her arms tied behind her back. She landed with a jolt, striking a knot in a branch hard enough to drive the breath from her lungs, but at least that prevented her from falling off the other side. Below, she could hear a bellow of rage as Boris discovered that she was now effectively out of his reach. Back near the former battlefield, she could make out Jered getting back to his feet and rubbing his side, cursing loudly about too hard roots.

Ami squatted down, pressing herself against one of the branches to make room, grabbed an imp from her dungeon, and plopped it down in front of her. The creature let out a surprised squeal and wobbled, flapping its little arms rapidly to avoid losing its balance and tumbling off its perch. The new arrival prompted Boris to let out an enraged scream, and Ami felt a shudder go through the wood of the tree, accompanied by a thwacking noise. Below, the barbarian was chopping at the tree with renewed fervour, using his battle axe like a lumberjack's tool. Alerted by the racket, Jered turned his head to see what had the black-maned man set off even more. His amusement at finding Ami seeking shelter in a tree like a scared cat turned into an alarmed frown as he spotted the imp about to bring its pick down on the lock of her chains. Plink!

"Stop that right now!" he demanded, grabbing one of his many throwing daggers from his bandoleer while running toward her location.

Ami wasn't about to oblige, and ducked her head lower. She could almost see the lock before her, badly damaged, hanging between her hands and against the tree bark. She needed a moment to realise that she *did* see it, from the perspective of the imp. Weird. Then, the lock shattered under a repeat strike of the magical digging implement, and Ami felt the chains around her wrists loosen. With the imp's assistance, she quickly unwrapped them, then stretched

her arms. They prickled as blood shot back into them, but she ignored the sensation and lifted her hand to her collarbone, and grabbed the warding amulet located there. It stuck to her as if it was a magnet and she was made of iron, but came off with a determined yank. As she had been under a lot of stress lately and was feeling vindictive, she bounced the golden trinket off of Boris's forehead. "Shabon Spray!"

Unnatural greyish-white mist blanketed the area, reducing visibility to about arm's reach. Jered tripped over a root, and bit down a curse. "Mercury! Cease this nonsense and come out! Otherwise, we'll be forced to treat you as hostile!"

"While Boris is like that? Not a chance!" it was hard to estimate the voice's direction, but he was sure that it had come from ahead, ground level. So she was moving already. He cautiously started stepping in that direction. Damn. He didn't want to deal with a completely unrestrained black sorceress with Keeper support when he was down one team member, and the other in a questionable state of sanity. Speaking of which... "Boris! Calm down! We need to work together!" they needed to capture or subdue the girl as soon as possible, before she decided to hunt them instead. This fog spell of hers was a real pain. "Boris?"

"I'm here. You'll help me catch the witch now, will you?" the large man growled, an undertone of mistrust swinging in his voice.

"Obviously," Jered drawled to the large silhouette in the fog. "Capture, not kill, if possible. We need to- over there!"

The two adventurers heard footsteps moving away from them, and gave chase. They were fortunate that the girl didn't seem the aggressive type, Jered figured. "Surrender, or we'll have to subdue you!" he shouted into the mist. He'd rather not have to fight her if he didn't have to. For such a meek-acting kid, she sure packed some nasty surprises.

Ami pressed herself against a tree and stayed motionless and quiet, watching as her pursuers passed not five metres away from her. Her heartbeat sounded so loud that she was sure it would give her away. The two figures, one heavy-built and looming, the other lean and

wiry, moved on without even a glance in her direction. Carefully, Ami backtracked her steps, looking at the ground to not accidentally step on a twig.

Cathy shuddered. The late spring air had become rather chilly when this fog had appeared. She covered Snyder's pale body with his robe to keep him warm, as there wasn't much else she could do for him. She was pretty sure that his internal bleeding would be fatal if something wasn't done soon. His shallow breathing had become rather ragged. The blonde suddenly looked up when she heard the rustling of dry leaves as soft footsteps approached. Rising from her squat position she turned to face the dark silhouette peeling itself out of the all-concealing murk. "Who's there?" she asked, sword drawn. Suddenly, the fog seemed to become strangely transparent, and she could see the young sorceress. Her blue eyes widened in alarm when she noticed that Mercury's eyes were back to blue. A glance down confirmed that the ward was gone, and so were the restraints.

"What did you do to Jered and Boris?" the swordswoman demanded, moving protectively between Ami the prone form of Snyder.

"I sent them on a wild-goose chase. They will be fine," Ami assured her, holding up her hands to show that she was unarmed.

Elsewhere, the able-bodied men of the group were rushing through the forest, which felt like a nightmarish maze full of dark, towering silhouettes and treacherous roots by the fog. "Where to now?" "Listen! She's over there, quickly!"

The imp moved with a hopping gait, making sure to stomp down hard and make a lot of noise when landing. It looked back over its shoulder and giggled quietly at its two pursuers. The little minion was deriving an inordinate amount of merriment from this assignment, and gleefully led the two men chasing it through every thornbush and mud hole it could find. It stopped for a moment, rubbing its three-fingered hands in malicious anticipation. Ahead, it had spotted a wasp hive hanging from a tree.

"Look, if I really wanted to harm you or him, I could just throw spells

at you out of the fog," Ami explained, turning away from the suspicious blonde and illustrating by turning an innocent sapling into an icicle with a well-aimed Shabon Spray Freezing. "Please let me heal him. I don't want to do any harm. I could have just run away, but instead I'm here to help."

Swayed either by the pleading expression in Ami's blue eyes or by her arguments, Cathy finally lowered her sword and sighed "Fine, I believe you. Just don't make me regret it."

Ami immediately knelt down at Snyder's side, putting both palms on his slowly rising and lowering chest, and concentrated on the spell. Cathy watched the proceedings warily, especially as the blue-haired girl's eyes flared red once more, brighter than she had seen before. Her sword's point was resting on the ground. but she hadn't sheathed the weapon yet, just in case.

Ami, for her part, found the healing procedure to be more difficult than when she had used it on herself. She had to track down the injured flesh, move it, and knit it back together with an exertion of will, while for herself, the injuries to her ribs had mended upon the slightest coaxing. Still, she felt a sense of elation as she sewed tissues back together and repaired broken bones. This, she realised, had been her goal in life: study enough to become a doctor and help people. She hoped that she would be able to keep this ability when she returned home. Maybe even teach it, she allowed herself to dream. She focused on finishing up, evacuating the blood from Snyder's lungs so he didn't drown in it. Cathy frowned when the acolyte vomited up a mouthful of black, clumpy blood. The knuckles on her hand holding the sword whitened.

Ami hurried to calm her. "All done. He should be fine now, if still weak. I couldn't replace the blood he lost."

It was true, the blonde thought. His breathing was more regular, and some colour had returned to his cheeks. Still, necromancy... well, what counted were the results.

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Journey's End

Originally on 2009-10-06T14:26:00

About an hour after Ami's fog had dissipated, Boris and Jered returned to the road, covered in bee stings and shallow scratches all over. In addition, it looked as if an entire thistle had gotten stuck in Boris' wild black mane. The mud-soaked trousers of both men made sad sloshing noises as the hapless adventurers shuffled forward with tired steps. Ami giggled at the sight, bringing her left hand up to her mouth. Snyder joined in with a snicker. The red-haired acolyte had woken up a while ago, but was still weak from the blood loss, so he was resting on the ground, with his back leaning against a tree. Cathy's features remained impassive, but her blue eyes gleamed with mirth. The swordswoman was tired herself, and her long blonde tresses clung against her sweaty cheeks and forehead. Re-capturing the two horses that had run scared during the altercation with the goblins had been hard work.

The two men had opposite reactions to spotting their elusive ex-captive waiting with the rest of the team as if nothing was wrong. Jered stopped where he was, one hand going to the dagger-filled bandoleer on his chest. He hesitated in mid motion and let the limb drop back to his side when he spotted Snyder. Ami noticed that the wavy-haired man's brown eyes betrayed some relief at seeing the acolyte awake and healthier. That went some way to soothe the anger she was feeling at his actions. Oh, she could understand why he had chosen to do what he did, but that didn't mean she liked it. Boris, however...

The bear-like man seemed re-invigorated by the sight of her, if the way he was bearing down on her, axe held high over his head, was any indication. Ami would have none of it.

"Shabon Spray Freezing!"

The barbarian's warbling war cry was suddenly cut off and replaced by a gasp of surprise. A coruscant blue blast of water magic struck

the ground in front of the charging warrior, and a wave of Arctic cold spread out from the impact point, covering the sparse grass and fallen leaves with a blanket of slippery ice. Boris' right foot stomped down on the slick surface and failed to find purchase. The giant of a man landed with a crash that caused a spider web of cracks to spread through the ice. Carried by his own momentum, Boris continued skidding forward until he reached the edge of the frozen patch and rolled to a graceless stop. Ami used the opportunity to encase his axe in an ice block, effectively freezing it to the ground, and glowered down at the man. Cathy and Snyder both looked troubled by her use of offensive magic, but mollified by the fact that she had acted in self-defence and gone out of her way to avoid harming their travelling companion.

Jered was ready to tear his hair in annoyance. How was he ever going to restore some measure of order like this? "Everyone, stop fighting!", he shouted, advancing toward the two combatants. Fortunately, the witch looked willing to comply - she really didn't behave like he would have expected from a dark sorceress. Still, she was getting support from a Keeper, of all things. If she was supposed to be some kind of infiltrator, then this direct interference had already defeated the point, unless this whole situation had been staged to throw off suspicion. It was a plan he himself might have come up with. Sometimes, Jered wished he was a more trusting kind of person who could take things at face value. Life had to be less headache-inducing when one didn't see schemes everywhere. Shorter though.

Well, even if the girl was an infiltrator, her role would demand that she didn't cause any trouble right now. Honestly, he was surprised she hadn't run off in the confusion. This left Boris as the most immediate problem. The big oaf had grabbed the handle of his huge double-bladed axe, that being the only part of it not stuck within the ice, and was pulling with all his might. Despite his face was going red from the exertion, the weapon wasn't budging. Good, this lowered the urgency of that problem. Jered spared some attention for his allies. Cathy was backing away from him, frowning and pinching her nose shut. He couldn't fault her, that last mud hole had been *vile*. Snyder was looking at him with a half-lidded stare that he couldn't quite place. Was that resentment? Things were really

getting better and better. "All right, everyone calm down and..."

It had taken over half an hour of intense debate, but finally the group had come to a compromise that everyone could live with, even if they weren't necessarily happy about it. Ami had returned to wearing the warding amulet. It was a symbolic gesture, as she had adamantly refused to be chained up again, and could remove it with some effort if she really wanted to. In turn, Boris had grudgingly assented to let the proper authorities decide her fate, grumbling all the while about this huge concession. Naturally, it didn't end there. Letting Ami ride behind him was completely out of the question, and likewise, Ami herself wouldn't feel safe if the violent oaf was out of her line of sight.

Thus, the two of them ended up riding on opposite sides of the road, with Ami sitting behind Cathy on her horse. Snyder would have still been too weak to prevent the blue-haired girl from falling off the mount if she had been riding with him. In fact, he had some trouble staying in the saddle by himself, which was why he was riding sandwiched between Cathy and Jered. This left Boris all alone on his side of the road, as he objected to be anywhere near the 'accursed Keeper-loving witch'. This arrangement suited the other party members just fine, as the shaggy man, unlike Jered, had not taken Ami up on her offer to provide the necessary water for a bath. The brown-haired man sneezed just then. Okay, maybe the bath water *had* been a just a tiny bit on the cold side, Ami reflected unrepentantly. Still, that had to be better than smelling like an entire pigsty.

The lost senshi wondered, not for the first time, if sticking with this group was really her best option. She reminded herself that, while she might have had more liberty exploring on her own, she would also proceed more slowly, as she didn't know how to ride. Besides, disappearing now would prove Boris right about not trusting her. Not to mention the fact that the adventurers were travelling in a direction that Ami would have chosen on her own. With heroes from all over the land gathering in the capital, the place was her best bet for finding someone who could help her get home. However, there was also the issue of her trial looming like a dark gallows-shaped shadow in the not-so-far future. She hoped that she could convince

the judges that she was no threat, and that her travelling companions would vouch for her character. Except for the brute, of course. There was little chance of getting him to do anything that aided her. He hadn't even let her heal his wounds, despite the fact that Snyder was in no shape to do it instead. The black-bearded barbarian had decided that it was better to just tough it out than to accept *her* help.

In addition, Ami liked having humans for company, despite some of them being a bit annoying, even if she didn't count Boris. Snyder, for example, was exceedingly grateful for her saving his life. Unfortunately, this manifested in him trying to do something nice for her by getting her to renounce her 'evil ways' and embrace 'The Light', which seemed to be one of the central tenants of his religion. She had politely informed him that she wasn't worshipping any dark powers, but alas, that hadn't put a stop to his conversion attempts. Technically, Ami was Shinto, but didn't practise it much. Not that the acolyte had ever heard of it, and she doubted that even if he had, he would have given up.

For that reason, Ami was somewhat relieved when Jered decided to strike up a conversation with her. She should have known better.

"Don't you think you owe us something of an explanation?" the wavy-haired man asked, leaning back to talk past the hunched-over Snyder. "For starters, what exactly are you? You *look* human, except for your hair colour, but you have shown some abilities that are clearly not."

He must be talking about her senshi powers, Ami realised. She could answer that easily enough. "That's just some magical augmentation to my normal physical abilities. I'm completely human.""Oh, and where did you get these augmentations? That Keeper who is aiding you, maybe?" Jered continued on this line of inquiry, his facial expression unreadable.

"What's up with that Keeper, anyway?" Cathy interrupted unexpectedly.

These questions were a bit harder to answer. Somehow, Ami didn't think that "I got my powers from a talking cat." sounded believable,

even if it was the unvarnished truth. Instead, she partly evaded "I was given these powers to hunt monsters and already had them before I got here. There was no Keeper business involved."

"Well, that doesn't explain why one is helping you," the blonde insisted, "and none of the explanations that I'm coming up with are very reassuring. So spill it. What's this Keeper's name?"

"Um..." this was bad. She had been acting on the wrong premise earlier, believing that the group already knew that she was a Keeper, and she didn't have a prepared explanation for this. She was sure that revealing herself was not a bright idea, though. None of the other party members ever mentioned the word 'Keeper' with anything but venom and loathing in their voice. Hanging her head and avoiding looking into anyone's eyes, she replied "I can't answer that question, but I can assure you that that Keeper means no harm to anyone in this land, except maybe Keeper Arachne, and only wants to see me safe."

"That's it? You can't tell us? Why not?" Cathy erupted. Ami could feel the woman's muscles tensing in anger.

Sighing, the blue-haired girl said. "It would be bad. Please believe me. I really can't go into more details, but you have nothing to fear from me or the Keeper. All I want is to find a way home."

Tense silence followed her statement, and Ami couldn't help but feel that she had lost some of the trust she had built. Only Boris chuckled into his beard. "The trial will be *interesting*, don't you think?"

This sombre mood set the tone for the remainder of the journey. The party spent a night camping out, rather than stopping at the overcrowded inn, as Ami's red-glowing eyes would have led to more trouble than the added comfort would have been worth. The white-robed senshi was excluded from the guard rotation, for obvious reasons. Despite this, she placed one of her imps somewhere well outside of the campfire's light radius in order to keep an eye on things. She didn't trust Boris to not have another go at her while she was asleep. Jered and Cathy were sharing one sleeping bag, which caused the blue-haired girl to blush, but at least she could use the

spare.

The group continued its journey as soon as dawn broke. As the landscape slowly changed from wilderness to farmland, the party met more and more travellers along the way, all moving away from the capital. Ami saw carts and wagons loaded with household items and furniture, accompanied by many women and children. They reminded her of pictures of fugitives she had seen on TV. A few short conversations confirmed that guess. Apparently, Keeper Arachne was gathering her forces underneath the city, trying to pre-empt the Baron's strike against her, and the people were fleeing the impending confrontation. In their anger and fear, many of them sent hostile glares at Ami, whose glowing eyes were making her stand out. It got so bad that Jered ordered her to take the warding amulet off so that the group wouldn't have to deal with a lynch mob.

Finally, close to sundown, Ami got her first glimpse of the capital of Blisshire. It looked much like the medieval cities of her textbooks, Sprawled out between a hill on its west side and a river on its east. A high stone wall surrounded the entire settlement, and the highest point of the area was dominated by the looming crenelations of a keep. "That's the capital?" Ami asked, a hint of disbelief swinging in her voice. It looked so tiny, compared to Tokyo. "You don't get cities that big in the Underworld, do you, witch?" Boris crowed.

Ignoring the two, Snyder had halted his horse. His brown eyes had widened, and were scanning the slope of the city's hill, darting left and right. Slack-jawed, he stammered out "Where is the Abbey?"

"Hrm?" Boris asked intelligently.

"The Abbey. It should be right there on the hill. Big, square building with a central clock tower and a wall around it. But it is gone! I need to know what happened!" the young acolyte explained, spurring on his horse. The others hurried to match his pace.

The moon was rising when the group arrived at one of the city gates. Ami spotted two guards with helbards, much more impressive in their gleaming plate with violet vest than the milita that had arrested her. These men here had the look of professional soldiers, and took their job seriously.

"Hold! Who goes there?" one of them shouted, suspicion tingeing his voice.

"Adventurers looking to join the fight against Keeper Arachne," Jered answered, directing his horse to the point of the group. "We also need to see the Baron about delivering a prisoner," he raised his thumb at Ami, who tried to hide herself behind Cathy. The ward was back on, and her eyes were glowing nearly as intensely as the torches. They clashed rather spectacularly with her acolyte robes. The guards gave her a calculating look.

"It's good to get some reinforcements. You'll find the Baron at the Fish Market. Stay away from the Keep. In fact, don't go anywhere into the good parts of town if you want to avoid a pointless and agonizing death." the guard waved them through.

Snyder stopped halfway through the arching gate. "Excuse me, but could you tell me what happened to the Abbey?"

"Keeper Arachne," here the guard spat on the ground, "is what happened. Bastard hollowed out the underground below. One moment, the building was there, and the next there was only a big hole with dust rising from it." His face turned sorrowful as he added "We lost many volunteers who had been lodged there. Most of the priests too, I'm afraid."

The young man with a bowl cut wobbled in the saddle, as if he had been hit. "I see, I see," he nodded weakly. "Thank you for the information."

Ami searched for something comforting to say, but couldn't think of anything that wouldn't sound trite. Cathy and Jered were busy discussing the situation in hushed voices. "...already lost the Abbey..." "...still think this is a good plan..."

This left her some time to admire the buildings passing by. The architecture seemed familiar, reminding her of German whitewashed frame houses. Most of the dwellings only had a ground and an upper floor. If there was an underlying plan for the city's growth, the builders had happily ignored it. Streets met at odd angles and varied unpredictably in width. Between the houses were narrow little alleys

that looked like black alcoves in the fading twilight. The torch that Cathy was carrying did little to improve visibility. What shocked Ami most was the smell. Compared to a modern city, the place was filthy. It had the aroma of a dunghill at best, often spiced up with a sickening smell of decay of indeterminate origin. From time to time, the stink of old fish drifted down the street, indicating that they were moving in the right direction.

Suddenly, there was a bend in the road, and the rows of houses parted to form a wide plaza near the river. At the moment, it was drenched in orange torchlight and resembled a stirred up anthill. Soldiers were running everywhere, carrying wood and ropes, while others were de-constructing stalls or standing around in groups and talking. Nobody took much notice of the new arrivals at first, until someone spotted Ami's eyes, at which point swords were drawn.

"What's this? You! Get off the horses! Who are you, and why are you here?"

Jered and the others complied without hesitation. "Prisoner transport for Baron Leopold. I have a letter from the Mayor of Goodvillage here, and- "

"All right, take it up with him. Up there on the podium, you can't miss him."

The crowd parted, opening a passage to the centre of the plaza. Ami huddled against Cathy, feeling uncomfortable with all the hostile stares in her direction. Then, she got her first glance at the Baron. He was striding around on an elevated wooden platform in the centre of the market, pointing this way and that way. A large purple plume on his helmet whipped up and down in unison with his truly enormous grey moustache. The crowds seemed to avoid the area around the red-faced man, and as she walked closer, she got an indication why.

"...idiots! Move that plank over there, we need more palisades! Where's the away team? I want those goddamn spiders gone yesterday! And someone find the bloody wizards and ask them if they *still* don't know where this thrice-cursed Keeper's dungeon heart is." As the baron talked, he turned around his own axis, his

extended index finger moving like the pointer of a clock as it fixated on whoever the noble was talking to at the moment. Soon enough, the digit came to rest on the approaching group. "You there! The acolytes over to the docks with the wounded, the fighters to Lieutenant Marcus over there!" He moved on, not even pausing to see if his orders were obeyed.

"Ahem. I'm afraid that won't be possible." Jered held up his hands as he interrupted the flow of commands.

The Baron's head whipped back, huge eyebrows furrowing as his steel-grey eyes focused on the green-shirted man. "Explain!"

"Well, the girl here," Jered grabbed Ami's right shoulder and pulled her forward so that the baron could get a better look at her, "is, despite her outfit, a prisoner whom we were tasked to bring here for judgement." He held out the letter from the mayor, which the baron snatched out of his hand, ripped open, and skimmed over.

"Dark witch, huh?" Leopold muttered, "and you want me to figure out what to do with her. I don't have time for this!" he crumbled up the letter and tossed it over his shoulder, barely missing the large pauldrons that held up his cape. "Did she commit any crimes?"

Ami shook her head, while Boris gleefully barked "The witch is working with a Keeper, who even sent some imps to assist her!"

An angry mutter went through the crowd at the loud proclamation, and the empty space around the party suddenly felt much smaller.

"Keeper, huh? Spying for Arachne?" Leopold asked, upper lip quivering with fury.

"No! I haven't done anything wrong!" Ami defended herself hurriedly. The baron looked less than convinced.

Cathy sighed, and sent a glare at Boris. "Actually, we think she's some Keeper's runaway kid," the blonde explained, figuring that this was less damning than any other possible association with a Keeper.

Ami's eyes widened in surprise. So *that* was what they thought

about her! Unfortunately, she didn't have time to fully explore the implications of that, as the baron was addressing her directly.

"Keeper's kid, huh? Whatever. Can you do anything useful, girl?"

Ami nodded, then elaborated "I know some ice and healing spells."

"And are you willing to fight against Arachne?"

"Yes!" she replied simply. Ami was a sailor senshi, and defending people from evil was her duty. She would have done so even if she hadn't been asked.

Leopold seemed satisfied. "Good enough. Put her on some front line team. Case closed."

Boris gaped, along with some of the advisers. "But, your Lordship! You can't just-"

"Stop wasting my time!" the irascible noble turned away, cape swishing. "What are you still waiting for? Back to work!"

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Deeper Into Trouble

Originally on 2009-10-08T01:32:00

Ami found herself guided toward a large fire at the edge of the plaza. A rag-tag bunch of armed figures was sitting around it, sharpening weapons, strapping on armour, and generally getting ready for battle. Even the blue-haired girl, who was no expert on military discipline, could see that this group failed to exude an air of confident professionalism. Apparently "front line team" did not exactly imply quality troops. Still, things could have turned out much worse. Sure, she had been drafted to fight evil, but that was something she would have volunteered for anyway. More worrisome were the dark glances that she was still drawing from the crowd. She put a hand on the amulet around her neck, feeling its warmth beneath her fingers. She was no longer a prisoner, so she figured that she didn't need to wear it any more, and plucked it off.

She wondered briefly if her eyes only glowed red when she was wearing the thing, or if it merely being on her person was enough. If Snyder was around, she would have handed it back to him, but the acolyte and her other travelling companions had been sent in a different direction to sign up and get the administrative details out of the way. So she just held onto the golden talisman by its long chain, which seemed to do the job. At least, new people she was encountering were no longer automatically glaring at her. Upon arriving at the gathering point, she spotted a clean-looking free spot in the circle of clamorous warriors and set down. A tanned man who was adjusting the string of his longbow looked up, took in the white robe, and raised an eyebrow. "Didn't think we'd rate an acolyte, what with all the priests gone."

Before Ami could correct his mistake, a gong sounded, and a large man stepped into the circle, plated boots resounding on the cobblestones. The knight stopped in front of the fire, not even bothering to take off his horned helmet. Ami hadn't seen any of the other knights wearing a deep blue shawl. Maybe a rank insignia?

"Attention!", the newcomer began to speak with a full baritone, "I'm Sir Leon, and I'm here to brief you on the mission, so listen up! Your life may well depend on it!" He raised his mailed gloves, making shushing gestures, and waited for the muttering to die down before continuing "As you all should know, Arachne has infiltrated the cities through the sewers. We have been able to identify some of the tunnels her minions used to climb in, and which should lead straight down to her dungeon. It will be your job to enter the sewers- " here, a chorus of good-natured grumbling about the smell threatened to drown out his voice, "- as I was saying, you will be entering through Arachne's access tunnels and prepare the way for the main assault force."

The man looked into the round, trying to meet the eyes of everyone present. "The good news is that you won't have to worry about rats. The bad news is that Arachne's spiders ate them. Oh, don't worry, we finally managed to clear most of them out, but watch the narrow side pipes anyway. On a more cheerful note, the Keeper will be expecting you to enter through the abyss where the Abbey used to be, so who knows? You might be the firsts to her hoard, after all!"

The audience cheered at this latest proclamation, and Ami wondered whether they were really aware of what they were getting themselves into. Two pairs of footsteps behind her alerted her to the arrival of Cathy and Jered, who had shown up just in time to listen to Sir Leon go into great detail about the minutia of the plan. Jered looked as if he had just bitten into a lemon, while the swordswoman at his side had her arms crossed over her breastplate, expression neutral as usual. Ami skidded aside to make room for them, offering the warding amulet to Jered, who made it disappear in a pocket as he sat down next to her. "Bad news?" the blue-haired girl whispered.

"The baron was so impressed with the job we did keeping an eye on you that he told us to continue," the blue-clad blonde explained.

Jered raised a finger to his mouth. "Shush. We'll talk later." With that, the three continued listening to the war planning.

"... and there's going to be traps. Lots of traps. Which I had rather

hoped to avoid," the weasel-featured man finished his explanation.

"Now, now. From what I have seen, you know your way around those," Snyder winked, grinning. "You'll just have to be careful, and you'll have Mercury over there to patch you up."

"Yeah, laugh it up, Mr I-am-with-the-main-force," Cathy commented drily. "At least that makes it your job to prevent Boris from charging off to challenge the biggest, meanest monster in sight."

"Don't remind me," the redhead replied, massaging his temples.

"Excuse me?" Ami interrupted. "Traps? I could really use my equipment, then. Is here some place I could change?"

Cathy looked down at the girl tugging on her sleeve. "Change? Into what? Are you going to conjure up some clothing again, even after what happened last time?"

Ami's cheeks coloured. "I don't expect that to happen again. So how about it? I could really use something that I can move easier in than these robes."

"Well, we aren't supposed to leave the camp," the blonde stated, walking over to where the group's horses were tied up together with those of the other adventurers, and retrieved a large blanket from the saddle bag. "If you really want to change, I can hold it up around you."

The blue-haired girl considered this for a moment, looking at the large square of fabric in the woman's hands, and then at the mass of soldiers all around, most of whom weren't paying any attention to them. Blushing faintly, she nodded. What other choice did she have? Getting her visor back was worth the little - if potentially embarrassing - inconvenience.

It turned out that there was precious little room in the tube formed by the blanket, held up by Cathy's outstretched arms. Jered certainly seemed to enjoy ogling the contortions of Ami's silhouette, backlit by a torch in the background, as she struggled to remove her robe within the confined space. She didn't know what would happen if

she re-applied her transformation when wearing something else in her senshi form, and she didn't care to experiment here where someone could potentially see her (though she made a mental note to look into it later). Besides, it would be inconsiderate to just risk destroying the borrowed robe. As soon as she had shed the white and red garment, Ami blurted out "Mercurypowermakeup!"

Cathy couldn't help but get a good view of the flash of blue light that enveloped the girl right in front of her for an instant. Momentarily blinded, she blinked to clear the sparks dancing in front of her eyes. Squinting, she eyed the skin-tight white leotard and the very, very short skirt. "If you intend on wearing that, why did you insist on a blanke- hey, are you all right?"

Ami was staggering, not because of any physical discomfort, but because an unexpected, loud wave of protest and outrage from her dungeon had caught her off-guard. Blue eyes going blank, she launched her mental presence outward to check up on the situation. What she found made her jaw drop, and a nervous giggle escaped her throat even as her left eyebrow twitched.

"KEEEPER! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE NOW!?" the Horned Reaper raged, cussing up a storm. The red demon was in the process of tearing up a sailor senshi outfit that had appeared on his body, expertly tailored to fit his proportions. Strips of fabric were flying all over the room as the monster ripped the offending garment into little pieces. A bent and broken tiara was lying at his feet.

Ami, having some idea of what had happened, if not of the why, turned her attention aside before she was exposed to the sight of more of the Reaper's anatomy than she ever cared to see. A little imp in a fuku ran past, seemingly unimpeded and not at all bothered by the change of clothing. A flare of orange light that made the blue murals on the dungeon walls glow violet prompted Ami to look back at the demon. She was just fast enough to see long, thin streamers of fire rise up from a circle around the Reaper's hooves and twist themselves into the shape of the equipment that had been replaced by the senshi transformation. A moment later, the tongues of flame solidified into the metal and leather of his pauldrons, greaves,

loincloth, and most importantly, scythe. *So that's why he treats it as if he didn't care much about its condition,* the confused Keeper reasoned, fixating on a little detail that made sense in this whole mess. She opted to transport the Reaper back to his throne room, the rubble in front of which still hadn't been moved. The murderous expression on the demon's face could only spell trouble.

"Me got shiny crown!"

"You looking silly!"

"You looking sillier!"

The goblins, as a whole, seemed to take the effects of the transformation more or less in stride. Ami wasn't quite sure what she should make of the collection of midget-sized, long-eared green senshi-lookalikes, but the way they were bickering, complete with blowing raspberries, reminded her painfully of Usagi and Rei, and she felt a pang of homesickness.

"Bwahaha! Maka look like a girl in that dress!" one of the goblins taunted, pointing a crooked finger at another, who promptly picked up a wooden stool and swung it by one of its three legs, clobbering the mocker into the ground.

"Maka IS girl, idiot!" the still fuku-clad goblin crossed her arms and huffed.

All right, crisis averted. She could focus back on her body and- Movement in one of the corridors attracted her gaze. She froze and stared, brain unwilling to process the sight, then stared some more. Even the *BEETLES!?*

"No, I don't know what's wrong with her. There was this flash of light, then she was wearing this costume and looking somewhat out of it, and suddenly she put her hands in front of her eyes and backed into me." Cathy was holding the whimpering girl in her arms, preventing her from falling over. The scene had drawn quite a bit of attention, partly because of the light show, but mostly from Ami's attire.

"Must be the embarrassment from being seen in an outfit like that," one of the female archers snickered.

"She does have the legs to pull it off," an unmistakably male voice jeered. "Wish she was in our group!" The comments degraded rapidly from there.

Ears burning, Ami opened her eyes and pulled herself to her feet, successfully focusing back on her present situation. She stood straight and did the best to ignore the jibes. It helped that she felt confident in her ability to take down any single man here while transformed, even without resorting to magic. "I'm fine now. Just some unexpected backlash," she quickly reassured all those who cared.

Amused, Jered asked "Ending up looking like this was your intention, then?" Nice tiara and earrings, those. Too bad they were only conjured. Well, maybe if one found the right buyer...

Ami just sighed. "Where I come from, most girls my age wear something similar to this," she explained, referring to school uniforms.

The brown-haired man found this rather hard to believe, but the sorceress' body language did indeed indicate that she wasn't considering her outfit immodest. "That place I'd like to see," he drawled after a moment of quiet contemplation, earning himself an elbow jab in the ribs from Cathy. "Ow!" he took a step aside from his blonde companion. "Do you think displaying your initiation ranks so openly is wise, though? Especially using the Underworld symbols."

Ami's eyes went round, and she blinked as she looked down at the indicated spot on her sailor collar, pulling the fabric upward with her right hand to get a better look at the black mark. Where did that come from? That hadn't been there before!

"Looks a bit skull-like. Necromany, right?" Snyder barged into the conversation. "What does this other bent squiggle mean?" the acolyte was bringing his face very close to the fabric, nearly bumping into Ami's nose with his forehead.

The blue-haired teenager bent away, covering the symbol with her gloved hand, and took a step back. "I don't know! Those weren't there last time I did this!" *Does just reading a book count as initiation?*

After a while, even the interest in Ami's strange attire had waned, not that this had stopped the stares completely - most of the soldiers and heroes were male, after all. The begin of the mission did its part to distract everyone involved from the comparatively scantily dressed girl. As if that wasn't enough, the stench emanating from the sewer opening once its rectangular wooden cover had been removed was enough to kill anyone's libido.

Ami's visor was covering her eyes, providing her with information about the narrow tunnels ahead, and giving her the best night-vision out of the team. The foul-smelling sludge covering the ground sucked at her boots with every step, and she was glad she hadn't come here wearing Snyder's sandals. Yuck! Her group consisted of ten people, including herself, Cathy, and Jered, and everyone was hoping that the sewage levels wouldn't rise any further. Especially the dwarf. In the circle of torchlight, thin pipes in the walls disgorged bursts of greenish-brown effluents within short intervals, as if blinking mockingly at the explorers.

"That way," a leather-clad man ordered. He had a shawl wrapped around his mouth and nose to protect himself from the smell, and had stopped in the middle of an intersection between their tunnel and a somewhat narrower one. The new corridor's only other distinguishing feature was that the wet-glistening cobwebs hanging from its ceiling were swinging slowly in a mild breeze.

"You sure?" a rough voice coughed out.

"The muck is flowing faster in that direction, the opening should be there," Ami confirmed independently, informing the others of the results of her scan.

"How can you even see that, girl? Not even a cat could see-"

"WATCH OUT!" arrows flashed over Ami's screen, alerting her of something hand-sized dropping down from the ceiling onto the man at point. Her warning was a split-second too late, and a black, furry spider alighted on the adventurers shoulder, immediately lunging for his face. With a pained shriek, the hapless victim clawed at the thing, feeling inch-long fangs pierce his cheek. With a wet crunch, the grotesque attacker was crushed into a sticky pulp in the man's fist.

"Crap, damn spiders! HEALER!" Cathy's hair looked as if it would have been standing on end if it weren't for her bowl-shaped helmet. Ami was already running toward the victim, splashing through the muck. Her patient was spitting out blood and something lighter-looking. Ami touched the stubble-covered cheek with her fingers, calling on her magic. She closed her eyes to avoid perturbing the other group members even more with the red glow. Closing the injuries was actually quite simple, as they were small and smooth.

"You were lucky," Ami commented after a moment. "The fangs over-penetrated and injected their poison into your mouth, not your flesh."

"You wouldn't be callin' me lucky if you'd had to taste this crap," the man joked, slapping her on the back jovially and making her stumble. "Thanks, girl."

The group advanced more cautiously after this near-disaster, and soon found what it had been looking for. A jagged hole yawned in the side of the rounded wall, like a black wound. A steady flow of sewage was streaming into the opening and disappearing with an echoing gurgle into its depths. The brackish brown liquid formed an arching waterfall bereft of any beauty. The adventurers gathered around the gap, leaning in to peer into the downward-leading chute.

"Careful, don't slip!" "Damn, how deep does it go? Can't see in the torchlight!" "All right, get the ropes."

"There's a kind of broad balcony about four man's lengths down on this side," Ami informed the others after putting her scanning equipment to good use. "The shaft widens below that and goes still deeper, about twice that distance."

"Right. We should be able to reach that, no problem."

"Doesn't anyone else see a problem with that plan?" Jered spoke up. "Namely, we'd have to climb through *that*," he sneered, pointing at the spray of stinking muck cascading down. "I don't know about you, but I don't fancy a nice and thorough sewage shower."

"Oh, don't be such a sissy, prettyboy," one of the archers taunted.

"I could freeze up a dam," Ami suggested. The idea of being drenched in raw sewage made her shudder in disgust.

"Nah, save your magic for when it's needed, lass," the dwarf interjected, holding up his pick-axe. "We'll just have to make ourselves a fine alternate entrance!" Moments later, he was already at work, hewing an opening well above the 'water' level into the wall to the right of the original hole. With interest, Ami noted that his tool seemed to work in a similar way to the picks of her imps, maybe even a bit more effectively. Then again, the wielder was stronger and bigger. A crumbling noise informed the waiting party of the fact that the digger had reached his destination and connected his fresh tunnel with the pre-existing one.

"Wait, if you can do that, why don't we make our own tunnel instead of braving that chute with ropes?" Ami asked.

The dwarf gave her an odd look, as if he couldn't understand why anyone would ask such a stupid question. "Because I get tired, lass. Duh."

About ten minutes later, Ami joined the others on the jutting rock balcony below as the last party member to descend. The group had roped down with no difficulties and was now looking for a way further down. As soon as the senshi's feet touched the ground, she could feel an odd sensation. It was a sort of charge in the stone itself, as if she was approaching an invisible boundary. "I have a bad feeling about this. Let me have another look," she demanded.

Unexpectedly, a cold wind chilled her to the bone, and humming, as if from a great swarm of bees, echoed through the shaft. Even the light of the torches seemed to shy away from the dreadful noise.

Suddenly, a cloud of darkness, composed of uncountable minuscule black bodies, surged out of the depths and reared up, expanding outward like a wave braking against the cliffs. Panicked gasps went through the crowd as the swirling blackness formed into a vaguely humanoid head and upper torso, its fanged, clawed and horned form more implied than outlined by the shifting darkness. Its eyes alone were well-defined, fiery red slits in the enormous head towering metres above the intruders.

"Shit! Shit! Shit! It's Arachne!"

"Look out!"

A laugh, formed by the synchronised rasping of thousands of limbs over chitinous carapaces, echoed through the chimney-like hall as lightning started to arc between the disconnected hand-shapes of the apparition. Before anyone could think of an appropriate defence, the enemy Keeper hurled a devastating bolt at the platform everyone was standing on, reducing it into so much rubble. Ami's eyes were widened with shock as she fell through the cloud of rubble and debris that also contained her comrades, into the waiting darkness below.

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Captured! (DARK)

Originally on 2009-10-09T20:29:00

After a few seconds that felt like a breathless eternity, the weightlessness of free-fall ended with an abrupt impact. Ami felt her back strike not the expected jagged rock, but the cold, yielding putrescence of the sewage dribbling down from above and gathering in a basin here. Around her, she heard the frightened screams of her companions cut short as they plunged into the vile-smelling, viscous liquid with loud squelching sounds. She had no time to feel disgusted when the muck closed over her head; even with a senshi's toughness, the shock of the landing had left her dazed and disoriented. The sludge, while much softer than stone, was still harder than water. Suddenly, her feet met the hard bottom of the basin, and she had the presence of mind to kick herself off and upward, to the surface. The nausea-inducing pool of liquid waste was only about as deep as she was tall, but that was enough to drown in.

With a gasp, Sailor Mercury broke the surface, grateful that her visor had prevented the unhealthy muck from getting into her eyes. She tried to brush it clean with one hand so she could take a look around, but before she had finished the motion, something slimy whipped through the mud, leaving a thin trench of parted sewage in its wake. Ami felt something like a muscular steel cable wrap around her waist and lift her up into the air. Her ineffectual struggles against the tentacle's smothering grip sent glistening droplets flying off her mud-covered form. A sudden yank jerked her sidewards, toward the looming walls. She got a fleeting glance at motionless bodies floating in the bubbling sewage, and then felt a sharp pain in her head as it met the rock with a loud thud.

Ami awoke to the sensation of lying on a cold floor, in a place that smelled undistinguishable from a public privy, with her head resting on something warm and soft. She opened her eyes, only to find her

vision swimming. Her headache re-doubled.

"She's waking up!" the voice sounded strained, if relieved.

"Careful, that's a nasty bump on your head," Cathy's voice cautioned from very nearby, indicating that it was her lap that Ami's head was resting on.

Braving the movement, Ami sat up, blinking rapidly to clear away the double vision. Feeling a bit woozy, she looked into the round, taking in the three bare, clammy walls and the opening where the fourth should be, blocked by arm-thick vertical steel bars. The blonde behind her followed the direction of her gaze, and explained bitterly "Yeah. Got captured by the Keeper. Damn it all."

"The others?" Ami asked, coming up short three after a quick count of the various sad figures with her in the room, all of which were in their underwear, bereft of arms and armour, and caked in half-dried sewage. Looking down at herself, she saw that she was just as filthy, but still fully dressed, having had no equipment to confiscate.

To her right, Jered shook his head sadly "Didn't make it through the fall."

Ami felt her blood go cold when the realisation sank in that some of her comrades had already *died* on this mission. Her secret identity as a sailor senshi had gotten her used to danger. Sure, the battles were often scary and painful, but nobody ever got hurt, at least not permanently. It made her feel as if someone had punched her in the stomach. "Oh."

"Are you well 'nough to heal up some of us, lass?" the dwarf asked, limping into her field of vision, and making her aware of the low-level whimpering that permeated the room. It seemed that nobody had survived the fall completely unscathed.

"Right. Of course!" anything to distract herself from her morose thoughts. "Who's the most hurt?"

Ami was kept busy as she patched up injuries and mended broken

bones, though she didn't know how to deal with the various inevitable infections. Killing off the bacteria with an intense influx of necrotic energy could potentially do more harm than good. She hoped that would be a problem for later. It was strange that she, as a prisoner, had been allowed to keep her magic, she reflected. In fact, the room seemed to conduct and amplify her Necromancy. What purpose could that possibly serve? Maybe their captors just hadn't known about her abilities? While walking to her next groaning patient, she turned her thoughts to escape. Maybe call an imp to dig a way out? She picked one up from her dungeon and attempted to drop it into the shadows outside the cell, but found that something blocked it from re-manifesting in the real world. She grimaced. Could Keepers block each others powers in their own territory? Her grip tightened involuntarily around the arm of the battered soldier she was tending to when she repeated the experiment and found that she couldn't even send or receive a gold coin. She was stuck in here!

The patient winced, and she realised what she was doing and loosened her grip, apologising. "I'm sorry, that arm is dislocated. I'll have to set it, this will hurt for a moment."

Forewarned, the man still shrieked in pain, convulsing under her attentions.

"Starting without me? How impatient!" an unknown male voice from outside the cell interrupted. The prisoners turned to face the new arrival, backing away from the bars when he stepped into the circle of light in front of the cell door. If he had hoped to make a dramatic first impression, he certainly didn't manage to pull it off. Even the magnificent dark violet robe with yellow skull patterns couldn't hide the fact that he was a comically lanky man, if tall. With the flowing long sleeves, black goatee, and high Dracula-collar, he was certainly going for the evil wizard look, but was sabotaged by the fact that he reminded Ami of a geeky college student trying his hand at cosplay. "Well, what do we have here?" he asked rhetorically, walking up and down in front of the cell.

The warlock hummed to himself for a bit, unphazed by the insults and angry demands to be released from the more short-tempered prisoners. His oil-slick hair glittered in the torchlight as he continued

"Hmm. Four scruffy-looking hooligans, two mildly attractive females, and a dwarf of indeterminate gender, all in dire need of a bath. Hold!" he held up his long-fingered right hand, palm facing in the dwarf's direction, displaying black-painted fingernails, "I'm not interested in that information!"

Having pre-empted the dwarf's outburst, he continued his monologue. "Ahem. In any case, I suppose the girls will have to stay intact until the victory party-"

"Screw you!" Cathy interrupted, throwing a clump of dried sewage at the warlock. Sadly, it disintegrated before reaching him.

"That *is* the general idea. As I was saying," he spread his arms grandiosely, "Behold your fate!"

A ball of white light formed above his head and floated to the apex of the domed ceiling, revealing the chamber behind him in all its grisly details. The racks were the least intimidating of the various torture instruments placed neatly throughout the room. Innumerable scalpels, knives, and rusted saws gleamed all along the walls. Ami stared in horror at a seat composed of nothing but spikes, braziers full of glowing coals, several sharp hooks hanging from the ceiling, and other, more exotic appliances whose undoubtedly unpleasant function she couldn't even begin to guess at. Pale as a sheet, the girl gulped and took a step back. "Wh-what? You can't mean to... Monster! Shabon Spray Freezing!"

The blast of bubbles shot forward from her outstretched arms, shooting toward the smug peacock. When it reached the bars, it suddenly turned aside and frosted over an innocent patch of the cell's ceiling.

"Uh-uh." the dark wizard wagged a finger chidingly. "Any spell from the inside stays inside. Nice try, though."

The other prisoners had similar reactions to Sailor Mercury's, minus the spellcasting, though some expressed their feelings with insults or frightened pleas, rather than just appalled stammering.

"Oh, be quiet. I haven't even gotten started yet. You should feel

honoured that a great warlock such as myself is overseeing your torture personally. Lady Arachne," he added with a polite bow, "if you would?"

The light flickered, and the four surviving men and one dwarf disappeared from the cell one after the other, each one yanked upward brutally before fading from sight. They re-appeared high above the torture devices, slamming down on them violently. Chains and manacles writhed and moved on their own, snapping at the victims' extremities like snakes, then pulled taut. The four male adventurers found themselves strapped to tables with bonds tight enough to cut into their flesh and make their bones crack in protest, while the dwarf landed in a large black pot filled with water. A fire lit up under it almost immediately.

"No! Jered!" Cathy shouted in fright, running to the front of the cell and rattling the steel bars futilely. "You let him go, bastard!" Ami joined her a moment later, worry for her companions clearly visible on her dirt-covered face.

The warlock ignored her completely, admiring the different saw-toothed daggers on the wall instead. "Oh, right. This is going to be messy work. I could do with an assistant. Let's see..." he studied each of the immobilised bodies for a moment. "Nope. Can't say I particularly dislike any of you wretches any more than the others. Well then," he pointed his finger at the closest table, which happened to hold Jered, "Eeni meeni miini moh, my assistant is you!"

The digit came to rest on the tanned warrior who had been bitten by a spider earlier today, and the black wizard stepped up to him, put his hand on the soldier's forehead, and leaned on it with his entire weight. His eyes flashed a bright crimson as pale green light gathered around him and crept down his arm, sinking into the shuddering victims skull. Quickly, the gaudily dressed magic user took a few steps backward, taking cover behind an iron maiden. On the table, the man started convulsing even as his chains flopped loose. He sat up, his posture rigid. His bloodshot eyes started darting around in their sockets in helpless panic. A long, unending scream escaped from his wide-open mouth as his eyes focused in terror on his hands, which had started moving on their own. They

rose to his face, fingers entering his mouth, grabbed the meaty flabs of his cheeks, and started pulling outward. With a sickening tearing noise, the flesh ripped loose, and blood gushed freely.

Ami, was at first too shocked to believe what her eyes were telling her. Aghast, she started vomiting at the sight, and turned away. A long minute later, the man's hoarse screams abated with a final gurgle, but that didn't stop the horrible tearing noises as the poor soldier's animated skeleton continued peeling off the layers of flesh, skin and sinew covering it, discarding them with great gusto. An unrecognisable chunk of bloody flesh flew through the bars and struck the wall next to Ami, causing the sobbing girl to sink to her knees and continue dry-heaving. This was beyond cruel! What kind of monster did this to other people? What would he do to her? She had to escape, to find a way out! No, pull yourself together, there must be a way!

"No! I'll tell you everything you want! I'll do anything! Please! Stay away from me!" one of the other surviving men gibbered, sprinkled in dark red blood not his own.

"Not interested, I have a better use for you," the warlock replied brusquely, stepping closer with a sharp-looking knife in his hand, "besides, this is a thoroughly recreational activity." Ignoring the pleading of his victim-to-be, he turned to the waiting, blood-soaked skeleton and pointed at Jered "Get started with that one. The hot irons are over there."

"No, leave Jered alone! Please!" Cathy shouted from the cell, desperate. Ami moved closer to her, feeling numb, and put a comforting arm around her. She tried to put the duet of screams, the hissing, slicing noises, and the sickening smell of burnt flesh out of her mind. Need a plan. Think! Think! She activated her visor, scanning the cell entrance for weak points. Frustratingly, there were none. The bars were arm-thick, flawless metal, buried deep within the rock of the ground and ceiling. If anything, the cell door was even sturdier. The reinforced frame showed no traces of rust, and the lock was heavy, its key hole positioned in such a way that there was no manoeuvre room to try any complicated lock-picking tricks. Not that she had any. No, if she wanted to get out that way, she needed the key.

From outside, the self-absorbed muttering of the warlock drifted over as both tortured men gasped for breath at the same time by random chance "...'foggy with a dash of hail and sulphur'? What kind of augury is that? Maybe I interpreted that wriggly bit here wrongly... yes... oh, what's this? Dead already?" disappointment tinged his voice as he straightened, moving away from the nest of sprawled-out entrails that had once been a man. A pale, luminous form rose from the smoke, rattling ethereal chains around its limbs. The ghost had the features of the dead body it was hovering over, twisted into a death mask of torment and all-consuming hatred. No sound escaped its bloodless lips as its arms extended toward the warlock's neck. "Oh, stop being so melodramatic. Off to the Keeper you go!" With a negligent wave of the sorcerer's hand, the apparition was flung all across the room, sinking through the smoothed rock of the walls as if they weren't there. Humming, the torturer approached the next stretched-out figure.

Ami bit back her bile. The key. If only she had the key! Her visor was showing her exactly what it looked like, but she couldn't locate it anywhere within the area. What could she do? The screams were doing nothing to help her think clearly, and she shuddered. She was feeling more detached from the situation than she should, she realised. *I'm in shock*, she self-diagnosed. Unhelpful. She still needed a way to get out of here and save whom she still could. But what could she do? Wait, she had a good three-dimensional representation of what the key should look like... Grasping at straws, Ami concentrated on using her freezing magic in a more controlled way. Whispering the invocation, she consciously breathed deeply and regularly, and focused only on assembling an exact copy of the images on her visor. It took her three tries, but then she was reasonably certain that the glittering ice resting on her shaking hands would work. Handling the slippery, fragile key with great care, she approached the door. A reluctant glance outside at the torture chamber revealed that the warlock was distracted, busy with a meat saw. Ami quickly looked away. So much red. She slipped the hand holding the replica key through the bars, fumbling around at an awkward angle before she managed to find the keyhole. With great care, she turned the piece of ice slowly, constantly worrying about it breaking. Click. The heavy cell door moved under Ami's experimental pull.

Sailor Mercury quietly swung the barrier out of the way and stormed out, Cathy hot on her heels. Despite being dressed only in her blue pants and a chest wrap, the unarmed woman's tear-stained face was set into a mask of determination.

"Shabon Spray Freezing!" foregoing the usual posturing, as a butcher like this man had lost all entitlement to what was basically a 'cease and desist' warning, Ami tried to catch him unaware.

"Oh, *bother!*" the sorcerer was quick enough on his feet to duck underneath the blast of blue, and the weapons on the wall behind him disappeared under a layer of ice. He wiggled three fingers in an odd gesture and became transparent on Ami's visor, then calmly walked to a new position and started moving his hands in arcane gestures. He seemed completely taken aback when Ami launched another stream of azure bubbles straight at him. Interrupted, he dodged out of the way and made a bee-line for the door, gathering up his robes as he ran. The heavy wooden gate opened up for him on its own accord. "Master! The prisoners are escaping!"

Ami took off after him when she lost her clean line of fire, but slipped on the ever-present blood splatters. This slowed her down just enough for the door to slam shut in her face. She punched the grainy wood in frustrated anger.

Cathy had only looked around for a split-second before deciding to leave the sorcerer to Mercury, rushing to Jered's aid instead. She grabbed one of the long-handled hammers off the wall and launched herself at the skeleton from behind. The animated construct of gory bones was a moment too slow in pulling its red-hot iron bar free from its tormented victim's flesh, and its parry came up short. The hammer head struck the skeleton's pelvis with a crunching noise, shattering the bone and sending the creature to the blood-drenched ground. The blonde fighter wasted no time in capitalising on her advantage and swung her weapon again and again until little more than a heap of bone fragments remained. "Mercury! Forget about that bastard! Quickly, get over here and help Jered!" Cathy was cradling the head of the brown-haired man in her arms. His body was a mass of charred burns, and he was groaning softly. "Oh, Jered," tears were flowing freely down her cheeks as she stroked his mud-encrusted hair.

Ami made her way through the abhorrent chamber, uncomfortably aware of the slaughter-house smell now that no immediate danger was occupying her thoughts. One of the men was little more than a hollowed out torso surrounded by entrails, completely beyond her help, another was unconscious and bleeding from long, shallow cuts. An absent-minded spell extinguished the fire under the pot that contained not-yet-dwarf-stew. What had happened here was terrible. This whole place was terrible. And these wounds. She didn't want to look, but had to. Trembling, she extended her hands, focusing on knitting the flesh back together as well as she could. It was complicated work, and she knew this was going to leave scars.

"Can anyone get me out of 'ere?" the dwarf complained. Cathy, being unable to assist while Ami tended to the wounded, proceeded to break open his chains with her hammer, as she had done for her friend before. Once the stocky, bearded individual was free of the hot water, she moved on to the free the third survivor.

"Th-thanks, Mercury" Jered groaned hoarsely, sitting up from the torture instrument and standing on wobbly legs. "G-good as new. We need to g-get out of here, though." He moved over to the wall in order to re-arm himself with the tools hanging there. The scalpels weren't his throwing knives, but better than nothing.

A wave of coldness passed through the room, and the light dimmed. "INCOMING!" Ami shouted, taking a ready stance.

With a strange wrenching noise, a quartet of giant spiders dropped out of thin air, each one landing in a separate corner of the room. Even the smallest of the ugly, hairy monsters was as big as a sheep at least, not even counting the long legs covered in sharp bristles.

Ami used the time that the monsters needed to sort out their many limbs and re-orient themselves to call out her trademark attack. "Shabon Spray!"

The oversized arachnids hesitated as the sudden fog robbed them of their vision, a fatal mistake. One of the yellow and black monstrosities suddenly found itself shock-frozen, then shattered by hammer blows from Cathy, who was venting her pain and anger at the situation on this easy target. A second spider charged blindly

into the direction that it had last spotted the smallest of the targets. The dwarf, being one of Ami's allies, could see it coming despite the strangely transparent mist, and hopped out of the way. The beast let out a shrill warble as its lunge carried it onward, straight into the spike-studded interior of the iron maiden. The impact toppled the open torture device, and its lid fell shut, trapping the injured monster inside. Long legs protruding from the gap under the iron coffin's lid twitched a few times before going still. Meanwhile, the third attacker found that it couldn't move very well with thrown daggers sticking out of its joints, while the last one joined its companion in being frozen statuary.

Wisely, Keeper Arachne refrained from throwing any more minions into the impenetrable murk.

"We really need to get out of here," Jered repeated. His body was covered in scabs, grime, and freshly-healed burns. "We are hurt, have no armour, only salvaged weapons, and half the team is dead. We should try to avoid combat and reach one of the other teams."

Ami felt inclined to agree. She would have loved to get revenge against their captors, but her companions were in no shape to fight, and she didn't want to leave them to fend for themselves. Nodding, she scanned the surroundings, producing her computer out of thin air. "All right. We are in a dead end here, and the only exit is through that door. There is a large open area behind it, and I can't find any secret exits."

"Aye, didn't spot any myself," the dwarf agreed. He had picked up a hammer himself, and was approaching the exit. "Get over 'ere and help me with that door," he ordered.

After a few determined blows, the obstacle was reduced into its splintery component parts. Ami climbed over the sawdust-smelling debris. The cave behind the doorway was enormous, large enough that an entire cathedral could have fit inside. A soft blue-green glow illuminated the area, emanating from special threads spun into the white spider silk that covered any exposed surface with smooth, shining threads. The entire place reminded Ami of the interior of a giant cocoon, ethereally beautiful in its own way. Bulbous, elongated forms hung from ceiling on long threads, reminiscent of pears

hanging from a tree. However, this was no fairy tale grotto, as Ami was quickly reminded of when she scanned the silk-wrapped bundles. It was a larder, and each of the hanging cocoons contained a human skeleton, some of which were small enough to belong to toddlers. Shaken, the blue-haired girl clenched her fists in anger. Was there anything that this Keeper wouldn't stoop to?

"Holy crap, that's an *awful* lot of spiders," Cathy commented after looking down the length of the cavern. Awful sets of eight faceted eyes stared back hungrily. "Watch out! They are even climbing along the walls!"

"We can take them," Ami declared, her blue eyes flickering red with rage as she stood her ground in the face of the onrushing chitinous wave, fury clouding her judgement.

Surprisingly, the spiders stopped as one. "Is that so?" the scratchy not-voice of Keeper Arachne asked, sounding quite amused. A humanoid shadow that hadn't been there a moment before was covering the ceiling, defying the rules of physics. Red pinpricks in its darkness pulsated cheerfully. "Then what about *this?*"

A giant, nebulous black finger stabbed down from the shadowy figure, into one of the spiders. Under the party's incredulous stares, the arachnid grew larger and larger, until it had reached the size of a town house. Eight eyes as big as Ami's head stared down at her, and the ground trembled when the oversized monster advanced on its trunk-like legs. A Shabon Spray Freezing struck the animal in the face, having about as much effect as a snowball hitting a human. Ami did what came naturally, and ran like a little girl. "Back! Everyone back into the chamber! Get away from the entrance!"

The party piled back into the horrible blood-drenched room and scattered, fighting against nausea as they breathed in the miasma. An enormous limb covered in razor sharp bristles stabbed through the opening and stoked around, overturning tables and equipment in the process. Shouting to be heard over the cacophony of bouncing furniture, Jered turned to Ami, who was pressing herself against the far wall. "Think your Keeper ally can do something to get us out of this?"

The limb retracted, scratching over the ground with its barbs as it did. A heavy impact shook the outer wall, making the torture tools lining it rattle. Rocks and dust rained from the ceiling.

"It's trying to break through the wall! DO SOMETHING!" the other surviving male adventurer shouted, looking ready to soil his pants - not that it would have been noticeable in his sewage-encrusted state.

Ami's eyes had glazed over, and her attention was elsewhere. Back in the dungeon, the pages of her travel magic spellbook rustled as an imp turned them for her with reckless haste. Something to move faster. Interesting, but inappropriate. A spell to increase a horse's stamina. Useless. Seven-Mile-Boots. She didn't even want to think about the mechanics involved. Ever-full sails. Useless. Useless, useless, useless. Wasn't there anything about teleportation? Skipping forward to the more advanced spells, she read as fast as she could, until she reached the end of the book. A spell that took half an hour to cast and would transport the caster to a point she had visited before. Useless under current circumstances. Most of the teleportation chapter seemed to be about retrieving, rather than sending things. She had the imp flip several pages back. Maybe this.

"I- I think I might be able to call some help," the blue-haired girl suggested after a while, awareness returning to her eyes.

"Only 'might'?" Jered asked, trying his best to keep his fear from affecting his voice.

"I have never actually tried this spell before," Ami admitted. "You had better move back a bit." Unknown to the others, she was questioning the wisdom of her decision. The ritual would be able to move a single, stationary creature to her location. Her imps and beetles were useless against the current foe, and the goblins wouldn't fare any better. The only underling she had who was potentially of any use was the one she loathed most and was wary about unleashing on the world. Her resolve to never release the demon had suffered a crushing blow from recent experiences, though. At least all the Reaper wanted was mindless slaughter, a slight but appreciable step up from Arachne and her underling. How

weirdly perspectives could change. She noticed that she was procrastinating, and prepared to get started. Of course, the red demon had to make things difficult by pacing around in his throne room, snorting furiously and stomping his feet in a rage.

The scaly, horned monster turned its head, shoulder pauldrons rattling, when a circular diagram made of blue flame appeared on the red carpet going through the centre of his lair. An imp-drawn sign slammed down in front of the restless demon, short and to the point: "Need something killed. Get into circle!"

"FINALLY!" the demon nearly tripped over his own feet in his puppy-like enthusiasm as he raced toward the centre of the counter-rotating circles, earlier rage forgotten.

Back in the half-ruined torture chamber, Ami had both of her hands raised high over her head as she struggled to pronounce the unfamiliar syllables of the spell. A clean circle of ground had expanded in front of her, pushing a ring-shaped wave of clogging blood outward as it grew in diameter. The magical circle's perimeter burst into icy flame, and thirteen evenly-spaced flickering runes appeared in the burning curtain.

"What's the lass doin'? Look at her eyes! That's a downright evil look!" the dwarf edged away from the chanting sorceress, eyeing her suspiciously.

"She's trying to summon help. I'd rather take my chances with her than with that monster spider outside! Get over here and help me, the small ones are trying to get in!" Jered put a stop to that line of thinking. The room shook again under a heavy impact as he and Cathy barricaded the entrance with an overturned rack, both bracing themselves against it with their shoulders as blows rained down on the obstacle.

"What could she possibly be callin' that could help with *that*?" the dwarf asked, even as he pulled another table toward the improvised barricade, adding loud scraping noises to the clamour.

Ami's voice reached a crescendo as she refused to let herself be distracted by the plight of her comrades. In response, lines of fire

pulsed and drew a pentagram in the centre of the summoning circle. Suddenly, the entire room coloured with the bright orange tones of an active furnace when a tornado of flame exploded from the ground, sending large chunks of the summoning circle flying. Within the pillar of fire towered a dark, horned silhouette, holding up a wicked-looking scythe as it bellowed a challenge to the world.

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Spiders Everywhere! (DARK)

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The air in the torture chamber flickered with heat, and the strong smell of sulphur mixed with the miasma of blood and faeces. The spiralling maelstrom of fire surrounding the looming form of the Horned Reaper dissipated, leaving little tongues of fire crawling outward over the smashed and overturned equipment. Even as the flames died down, the yellow eyes of the crimson demon blazed brighter as he turned to the closest figure, raised his scythe, and lunged.

Ami, who was standing at the edge of the summoning circle, cringed away from the searing heat released by the completed ritual. She felt her blood freeze as the Reaper unexpectedly turned toward her and his scythe whistled down at her. Instinctively, she lashed out with the same power she used to transport and move her minions, holding up her hand protectively. The blade stopped, quivering, as the Reaper fought against invisible bonds. "Stop! What are you doing?" Ami squeaked, giving the creature an invisible shove that made him stumble back a step.

The Reaper's eyes went round with surprise as he looked at her in confusion, then disappointment. "Oh. That's you under all that filth." Without another word, he turned away, grin returning as he spotted the heroes pressing themselves against the walls in an attempt to get as far away from him as possible.

Whimpering, Jered voiced what all of them were thinking "By the gods, we are all going to die!"

Tugging at the Reaper and interrupting him in mid-stride, Ami shouted "Not them either! The spiders! ONLY the spiders! Nothing else!"

Irritated, the horned demon snorted and kicked at one of the fallen racks, breaking the device into two parts that landed with a splash in the coagulating blood "Are you sure? Hmph. Where? "

The other party members huddled together as the monster's gaze swept over them. Even the dwarf unashamedly hugged Jered's legs in fright. Fortunately, the sound of wood splintering distracted the Reaper as the improvised barricades gave way. In the doorway, a sheep-sized mottled spider pushed its way through the tumbling debris.

With a whoop of joy, the Reaper stormed toward the creature. It let out a surprised screech as the demon slammed into it like a freight train, completely ignoring its attempt to bite him. The tackled animal went flying, and the red demon disappeared out of the door, after it.

Ami let out some breath she hadn't realised she was holding. At last, something had gone almost according to plan. Then she noticed the faces of her companions, who were looking at her in a mixture of fear and awed horror.

From outside, hacking and slicing noises could be heard among the angry chittering of the arachnids. A severed spider leg flew in through the open entrance, trailing an arc of ichor before landing on the floor and bouncing twice.

Ami wondered what were they on about now "What? I told you I was going to call in some help."

Jered cleared his throat "I don't believe it. You don't do things half-way, do you? What were you thinking, summoning *that*?"

Ami's hands grasped at each other nervously "To be honest, it was something along the lines 'a goblin won't do'."

Cathy broke the stunned silence by exploding "And therefore you decide to call a fucking Horned Reaper? And it even *listens* to your orders?"

"No time to explain that now! Need to go help him deal with the spiders," the senshi fled from that line of questioning. "Shabon Spray!"

Meanwhile, the dwarf motioned to Jered to lean down, and whispered into the brown-haired man's ear "Are you sure she's on

our side?"

Overhearing this, the other male survivor of the team shook his head in disbelief and muttered so quietly that only the others who were standing next to him could hear it "A Reaper. She can summon a Reaper. That girl is a disaster waiting to happen. We should do something about her while we still can." He watched the retreating back of the blue-haired girl as she moved to the exit and cautiously peered outside.

The blonde swordswoman commented in a deadpan tone of voice "I'm sure her pet monster will appreciate that."

Outside the room, the Reaper let out an appreciative whistle upon spotting the mammoth-sized giant spider. "Now *that* is worth killing!"

He had moved underneath the monstrous arachnid, his hooves making faint squelching noises on the ichor-drenched silk covering the floor as he danced around his opponent's attempts to step on him. Hack. There went a chunk of leg. Slash. And another. The monstrous spider bellowed in pained fury as the Reaper went to town on its front legs, shortening them piece by piece and forcing the creature to lean forward. Once the head was low enough, the demon jumped, dodging a bite from fangs as long as his arm as he buried his scythe's blade up to the hilt in the spider's forehead with an overhead swing. The giant spider reared up in its death throes, but the Reaper refused to let go of his weapon, and was yanked upwards and thrown into the air. The scythe came free in a spout of gore, and the demons trajectory carried him high, above Mercury's fog bank that blanketed the lower levels of the cavern. While in mid-air, the murderous creature righted itself and looked for a good landing point. The spider that popped open like a grape under his hooves as his weight bore down on it from above never saw him coming.

Ami had merely hoped for a distraction when she had decided to call the Reaper for help. A disposable one, she admitted guiltily to herself. Instead, she was watching him carve his way through the twitching, chitinous masses, leaving nothing but mutilated corpses in his wake. As she watched, another spider went up in flames after it had tried to shoot sticky webbing at him from a distance. Slowly at

first, then faster and faster, the spiders retreated, until they were in full rout. Roaring in glee, the Reaper gave chase.

"Hey! Wait!" Ami shouted, watching her minion disappear around a bend as he completely ignored her. She looked back at the opening to the torture chamber. Her companions were approaching reluctantly, looking at the piles of dead spiders with wide eyes.

"Is it gone?"

"No matter! We need to get out of here," Cathy pointed at one of the smouldering bodies, "This spider silk is slow to catch fire, but once it does..."

The implications, combined with the fact that no part of the huge cavern was not covered in webs, was motivation enough. Everyone was already running when the first flames started licking up the walls, filling the grotto with acrid black smoke.

Ami watched the readouts on her visor as the tunnels rushed past her, and tried to ignore the fact that there was an entire graveyard dangling from the ceiling, packaged into innocent little cocoons. Arachne seemed to prefer big and spacious natural-looking caves that joined each other at different heights and at odd angles. It made sense, she supposed. The spiders could just walk up walls, and any intruders would have to use the narrow, winding stairs instead. In the distance, she heard loud gongs and the crumbling noises of collapsing walls. The clanging of metal on metal echoed softly through the halls.

"The main force must be attacking," Jered concluded, skidding to a halt at the first intersection that opened up in front of the party. "Which way now?" Next to him, Cathy was panting, leaning forward with her palms resting on her thighs.

Ami dismissed the ascending left tunnel almost immediately, and pointed down the right one. The displayed energy flows in the cavern were denser in that direction. Besides, a trail of spider pieces led that way. "Arachne's dungeon heart must be that way. So is the Reaper."

"Them are two excellent reasons to go the other," the dwarf blurted out, and let actions follow his words. After only a moment's hesitation, the other new member of the group followed him, never looking back.

"Well, they do have a point," Jered looked ready to go down the same path, "we are here for the loot, not for the fight. Over there is where all Arachne's monsters will be."

Ami frowned. "But Arachne needs to be stopped, and I *can't* go that way! What do you think is going to happen when the Reaper encounters the other teams? I NEED to catch up with him!"

Cathy went pale as several mental images flitted through her mind, none of them pretty. "You have a point. We'll stick with you."

The wavy-haired man looked ready to argue, but then closed his mouth and nodded. "Right. We probably stand a better chance with you at our side then on our own," he admitted.

Knee-deep in spider corpses, Baron Leopold stood at the front of his forces, sabre held high in triumph, and ichor stains covering his enchanted dwarf-forged full plate. He lifted the face plate of his helmet, and immediately the ends of his enormous moustache uncoiled, freed of their confinement. "That was the last of them, men! Onward, let us rip out the dark heart of this monster!"

His features were cast in sharp relief when purple electricity danced over the transparent dome shaped shield that covered his position. One of the three wizards holding his staff horizontally over his head collapsed to his knees, droplets of sweat dripping into his long white beard as he struggled to maintain the barrier.

"My Lord, *please* keep your head down", Lieutenant Leon warned from where he was hiding behind a particularly bulbous spider's abdomen.

"Nonsense. I'm not afraid of that hoary old Keeper." He turned to the enormous black presence of the Keeper that was flitting around in

the air above the amphitheatre-like hall, and shook a fist at it. "YOU HEAR THAT, ARACHNE? RAGE AS MUCH AS YOU WANT, I'M COMING FOR YOU!"

In response, another lightning bolt shot forward from the red-eyed cloud of buzzing insects. One of the blue-clad wizards collapsed from the exertion of having to hold up the ward. The ranks of soldiers behind the Baron ducked deeper behind their shields.

"Meh, wimp. You, acolyte, get over here and patch him up!"

Crawling on all fours, a redhead with a bowl cut reluctantly left the protective ranks of soldiers and came forward. "My Lord, I'll do my best, but I'm not really trained to..." Snyder started to protest.

"Blah, blah, you are once again useless. Abbot Durval, do it instead. What do they teach acolytes these days?" the Baron seemed disinclined to tolerate incompetence.

"Actually, I do have talents that- what's that noise?" Looking up from the exhausted wizard, Snyder raised his head and peeked over the wall of mangled body parts. Through the flickering, multi-coloured hues of the magical shield, he could see the large circular room expanding in front and below of him. Resembling an arena, it was most likely used by Arachne to hold audience with her minions. Therefore, the double-winged black door fit for city gates blocking the bottom-most of the three exits from the room must lead to the inner sanctum, the Heart chamber itself. The stone banks ringing the circular open space in front of the ebon gates were trembling, and a sound like distant thunder was growing ever louder.

From the wide hallway opposite the one the forces of Good were currently regrouping in spilled a wave of moving limbs and glistening chitin. "Shit! More spiders! Combat positions!" "Wait, they aren't coming for us!"

Legs pumping madly, the spiders climbed over each other in their haste to get down the arena walls and to the black doors. Wails of fear went through the ranks of the heroes when they spotted the red scythe-wielding figure responsible for the stampede. "HORNED REAPER! She has a horned reaper!"

"Correction," Baron Leopold stated calmly, flicking at the grey strands of his moustache with a finger, "she has a *berserk* horned reaper. Good for us, bad for her. Say, Leon, I don't have a stuffed reaper in my trophy room yet, do I?" he added, rubbing his gauntleted hands together.

"My Lord? You aren't planning to-" the knight with a blue shawl draped around his shoulder tried to reason, before he noticed that his liege was no longer listening.

The Baron had already turned back to watch the chaos in action. Above, the black cloud of thousands of insects that composed Arachne's projection was screaming in rage. "No! Back, fools! You are going to ruin everything!"

One of the first spiders to reach the sandy circular plaza in front of the gates spontaneously burst into flames, while a second disappeared into a pit trap. The wave of arachnid bodies pressed on though, despite spiders being impaled by spikes shooting from the ground or being hurled into the air by explosions. Above the carnage, the shadow of Arachne buried its non-existing face in its disembodied palms. With a hiss that sounded suspiciously like a sigh, the black apparition disappeared through the wall leading to the heart chamber, and its huge gates opened slightly to let the remaining sanctuary-seeking minions in.

"Three more figures from the tunnel, My Lord," Leon, who had kept an eye on the side passage, informed his liege, "two-legged, possibly orcs."

"Ahem, ahem, I do believe those are merely incredibly filthy humans," Snyder corrected when the new arrivals approached at a jog. "These must be what remains of the advance group," he added with sudden worry for his travelling companions.

The baron nodded. "Smart idea, following that panicked mob trampling all the traps in its way."

The broad corridor that Ami was running along widened into a large,

circular chamber, lit by the same kind of glowing spider thread as the rest of the dungeon. Behind her, she heard the wheezing and panting of Jered and Cathy as they tried to keep up. Ahead, the tail end of the spider stampede disappeared over some kind of cliff, and that infuriating fool of a Reaper jumped right after them. Moments later, she heard explosions and saw smoke, pillars of flame, and flying spider bits. Arriving at the edge of the amphitheatre, she slowed down and surveyed the scene below. A smoking, burning field of sand was littered with dead or half-dead spiders. Ahead, black gates were closing after allowing passage to the frightened minions. Obviously, her own so-called underling had *somehow* managed to put on a burst of speed and to slip inside too. Through the crack between the closing wings of the door, she could see the room behind flash a bright white as three curving bolts of lightning shot down from above, striking the red demon. In an explosion of shattered floor tiles, he was thrown into the air, and uncountable white threads shot toward him from all sides. Then the door slamming closed blocked her vision.

Ami stopped, unsure of what to feel about that. She didn't get the chance to collect herself, because a large armour-clad figure approached with ringing footsteps, purple helmet plume whipping up and down.

"Ah, one of the front line teams. You are just in time for the final assault." The baron turned to the ranks of soldiers and wizards pouring in behind him "Wheel in the ballista! Beyond this door lies the dungeon heart of Arachne! We will scour her evil from this land forever!"

The last of the heroes emerged and formed up in ranks. Accompanied by loud rumbling, a compact little siege weapon was pulled in by six dwarves, who proceeded to point it at the door, surrounded protectively by a quartet of blue robed magic users. In well-disciplined rows, the warriors advanced down the amphitheatre's steps and started walking over the smoking field, toward the towering gates. Ami and her travelling companions were moving alongside them. As they approached, she could hear the deep heartbeat of the enemy heart vibrating through the bedrock.

"Watch out, a spider near the ballista!" Ami didn't know who had

shouted the warning, but with a sinking feeling she saw a lone arachnid that appear out of nowhere. As she had already observed once before, the spider started growing larger and larger. Before the siege weapon's team could react, the improbably huge creature had stepped on the apparatus, reducing it and two of the handlers to a pulp. By now, soldiers were screaming in fear and fleeing in blind panic, away from the behemoth that looked as if it could fit all of them in its stomach.

"Cowards! It's just a spider!" the Baron shouted, shouldering his way against the stream of the fleeing masses and toward the creature. "Come back and fight it! FIGHT IT I SAY!"

"He's insane, isn't he?" Cathy asked. Ami nodded dumbly. From past experience, she knew that her ice attack did nothing to stop a monster of that size. The spider was unhurriedly climbing down the slope of the amphitheatre, approaching the main mass of troops at the bottom.

"Wizards, assemble! On my mark! Fire!" Lieutenant Leon brought down his hand, and a dozen fireballs streaked like comets through the chamber and toward the monstrosity, impacting with bright flashes. The spider let out a high keening wail, and turned from a towering, sharp-bristled, poisonous whirlwind of death and destruction into a towering, sharp-bristled, poisonous, burning whirlwind of death and destruction.

"Belay that order, focus on the gate instead! Arachne can just enlarge a new one if this one fails! We must reach the Dungeon Heart to put an end to this!" a hunched-over man in extremely elaborate priest's robes shouted.

"Who's that?" Ami asked as she was swept up in the crowd moving toward the heavy reinforced doors blocking passage into the inner sanctum.

"Abbot Durval," Snyder informed her, "He wasn't at the abbey when Arachne destroyed it, and wants revenge for all the innocent deaths."

Ami felt as if she would be crushed to death in the mass of people

all pressing against the doors and trying to get away from the super-sized arachnid. Overhead, fireballs pattered against the gates. Suddenly, the pressure vanished, and the huge wings of the door swung inward with a creaking sound. Immediately, the crowd of soldiers poured inward. Ami looked over her shoulders to the outside, and could see the Baron's cape waving as he charged toward the monster, accompanied by only a handful of his most fanatical followers. Because she was looking in the right direction, she could see the enormous gates quietly swing shut again after letting the 'intruders' in. "Watch out! It's a trap!"

An unwilling murmur went through the crowd, all asking roughly the same question. "Where is the Dungeon Heart?"

"Now *that* 's just unfair!" Jered cursed, looking up. Others heard the brown-eyed man's heart-felt exclamation and followed his gaze. They saw that the heart chamber was in truth a cylinder, much taller than wide. In the middle of the ceiling disc sat the dungeon heart, far out of reach of the heroes. About half-way up, a spider web spanned the chamber, with the Keeper's surviving minions covering the walls above it, staring at the adventurers from sets of unblinking eyes. A single thread was suspended from the centre of the horizontal web. At its end hung a writhing cocoon that swung around like a pendulum as something inside fought to break loose. A single straight horn was poking out of the silky prison.

Ami noted that the enemy heart looked much like her own, despite being upside-down. There was the beating membrane in the central shaft, the superstructure, and the column of swirling energy in its centre. More interesting was the giant, cloud like face of Keeper Arachne leering down on the assembled heroes and laughing from thousands of insect voices. "Welcome, welcome. If you think that this is unfair, you have seen nothing yet," she mocked. Red eyes flashed brighter "Drown like the rats you are!"

The rattling of heavy chains preceded a metallic scrape as a heavy floodgate sat in the lower third of the wall slowly opened. A stream of ice-cold water cascaded out, washing away the closest soldiers. Ami and some of the brighter heroes immediately realised what intruding water and no exit meant. Fortunately, she had the means to do something about it. "Shabon Spray Freezing!" Some of the

inrushing water froze, partially plugging the source. She shouted her attack again and again, each time reducing the inflow some more. Her visor flashed red in warning, and she jumped aside, just before a lightning bolt from above slagged the tiles on which she had been standing. As she rolled to a stop, she counted herself lucky that the floor wasn't wet yet where she had been standing, and resumed throwing freezing bubbles at the floodgate. The plug of ice blocking it was growing and growing.

"Protect the sorceress!" Someone shouted, and Ami saw a purple shield intercept the next two arcs of electricity headed her way. Giving up on trying to smite her directly, Arachne instead directed her lightning into the puddle that had formed close to the now sealed floodgate. The group of unfortunate soldiers standing in the water convulsed and went down, smoke rising from their twitching bodies. Obeying an unseen command, all the spiders along the wall jumped and descended toward the heroes on silken threads like a cloud of huge, sharp-fingered venomous hands. Things were about to get really ugly.

Ami didn't know where to look first. Enemies and the screams of the dying were everywhere! At least her fog had made sure that it was the spiders who did most of the dying. The huge double doors exploding inwards drew everyone's attention. With a thunderous noise, the gates were blown off their hinges and tumbled inside, flattening friend and foe alike. Through the opening stormed the huge, ugly, enlarged spider, long lanky legs flailing about in a frenzy as it nearly slipped on the metal of the door wings underneath. Ichor seeped from gaps in its chitin, and it was trailing smoke from charred black spots on its carapace as it rushed forward in a straight line, trampling anything in its path.

"ARACHNE! I'M COMING FOR YOU!" the Baron hollered at the top of his lungs, riding atop the frenzied creature and whacking its bulbous yellow-spotted back with the flat of his enchanted sabre, spurring it on to go faster and faster. His cape was nothing but tatters, and the ends of his moustache were on fire, but the crazy man had his left arm wrapped tight around the constriction between the spider's back and head and didn't let go even as it ran out of even ground and went straight up the wall instead. It was certainly

fast. In an eye-blink, the web blocking the path half-way up the room's height had been ripped to shreds. A moment later, spiderzilla had run out of wall and moved onto ceiling instead. Finally realising the danger, Keeper Arachne plucked the giant animal out from under - or more accurately, above - the Baron. Momentum conspired to keep Leopold going in the right direction, and moments later, he was hanging from the upside-down superstructure of the Dungeon Heart.

The heroes on the ground lost sight of him when something huge appeared in mid air and obstructed their view - in her anger, Arachne had hurled the giant spider at the greatest concentration of heroes she could see. To Ami, the incredible bulk of the spider seemed to move in slow motion, turning around its own axis and wriggling its legs as it inexorably sped toward the ground. She ripped her gaze away from it and broke into a sprint, ribbons trailing behind her as she dashed madly to get out of the growing shadow of the beast. With a grunt, she leaped forward and rolled to a landing, just as the impact of the creature shook the ground behind her and catapulted her up in the air again. Great fountains of spider innards fountained in all directions.

Ami landed on her back, just in time to see the glittering form of Baron Leopold far above use the stone gargoyles and other knick-knack decorating the Dungeon Heart superstructure as handholds to pull himself ever-closer to the beating membrane. The shadowy form of Arachne was batting at him in desperation, but being composed of flies, it did not achieve much more than irritating him. Finally, Leopold reached up, took his sabre out if his mouth with his free hand, and stabbed.

"NOOO! DIEEEE!" Arachne gathered up the last of her available mana and put together a feeble lightning bolt, which she poured directly into the madman's body. Spasming and twitching, he held on with dogged determination, grimacing, biting his teeth together, and content to let the metal of his sabre conduct the electricity back into the heart's membrane even as he cut and hacked.

The moment the dungeon heart died was unmistakable. It was as if the entire dungeon shuddered and groaned, roaring like a wounded animal. Floor tiles jumped out of their spots and cracked, murals

crumbled into sand, and an unseen wind seemed to blow toward a vacuum where the heart had been. A black sphere of a pitch blackness had opened at its location, and the shadowy form that was Arachne spiralled around it like water going down a drain, inexorably drawn deeper and deeper. "Nooo! NOOOO! YOU WILL PAY! YOu will all suuuuufffeeeer...."

Against the background of pure darkness swallowing the Keeper, the falling shape of Baron Leopold appeared like clearest silver. Smoking, his armoured body dropped, like the huge spider had before him.

There was a sudden flash of pure, wholesome light, and within moments, the giant spider web hanging in tatters from the walls knitted itself back together as if it had never been broken. Abbot Durval was holding up his staff, chanting quietly. Everyone seemed revitalised by the light, Ami saw. However, she herself had flinched away, as if seared by its touch. She wondered what that meant for her. Absently, she watched the restored web bend as the heavy body of the Baron plummeted into it. Despite being stretched to its limits, it held, turning suicidal stupidity into shining heroics. Nevertheless, Ami had to admit that the Baron's escapade had been more impressive than anything Tuxedo Mask had ever pulled off. As she watched, the man used one of the dangling threads to rope down to the ground, where he was immediately surrounded by well-wishers and sycophants. Even the Abbot hobbled his way, intent on patching up whatever still ailed the hero of the hour.

Within the giant, burst-open corpse of the megaspider, something stirred. Soldiers moved away from it warily as its torso started to shake. A smell of sulphur permeated the air, and suddenly, flames rushed outward, burning a circular hole in the carcass, through which a scythe-wielding figure strode.

"Oh no! It's the Reaper!" "Why is it still here?" "Run for your lives!"

Ami moved closer to Snyder, who had gone pale at the sight, though he didn't run like many others "What's the big deal about that demon, anyway?"

With a cry of glee, the Baron sprang to his feet, face plate snapping

shut as he pulled his sabre. "Huh, there's my trophy, after all!" Even the best efforts of his advisers couldn't prevent him from rushing toward the red-scaled engine of murder. The Reaper saw him coming, and his annoyance at being covered in spider guts turned into anticipation as he brought up his scythe to eviscerate the approaching fool.

Snyder looked surprised that Ami didn't know. "Horned Reapers are some of the most feared minions of evil. Legends tell of them as unstoppable killing machines, bestowed upon deserving Keepers as a sign of favour by the gods of evil."

The corners of the red demon's mouth lowered in irritation as his quarry evaded another of his strikes. The noble was expletive-inducingly quick on his feet, staying within the demon's guard to cancel out the latter's strength and reach advantage. Under his helmet, the baron's eyes were gleaming with a battle-lust mirrored in the Reaper's. Oh well, if the human wanted to play in close with that sabre of his... The Reaper grinned, baring his teeth. Suddenly, the crowd gasped when a lightning-quick thrust of Leopold's magical sabre ended in the weapon protruding through the Reaper's silhouette. The awe turned to dismay when they saw that, rather than killing the demon, the weapon was trapped between the monster's muscular left arm and his torso. The Reaper's grin widened in anticipation of the kill.

Blinking at the course the battle was taking, Snyder added "In hindsight, their reputation might have been exaggerating a bit."

The horned reaper's eyes widened in surprise when the disarmed baron simply let go of the weapon. Raising his arms, the militant noble grabbed the demon's long, straight horns as if they were handles, and yanked downward. With a deafening clang, helmet collided with nose ring, and the demon staggered in pain. Grabbing his blade when it fell from where it was lodged, the Baron turned the motion into a cut at the demon's unprotected chest.

Something tugged violently at the Reaper from behind, and he was thrown off his feet, dropping underneath the Baron's blow. The same irresistible force continued pulling, and the demon skidded over the floor, lying on his back and trailing sparks as his iron pauldrons

scraped over the hard stone. Soldiers who had not moved during the fight were scattering in all directions as his bulk slid in their direction. He came to a stop looking up a familiar looking, if mud-covered skirt. Growling, he sat up, whirled around and bellowed "What are you doing, Keeper?! I nearly had him!"

"KEEPER?!" Jered, Cathy and Snyder were not the only ones who shouted this, eyes going wide as they looked at the blue-haired girl in new light. They were, however, the only ones who wished they hadn't stuck around the sorceress when the Reaper suddenly shot their way. It *look* like some show of loyalty, they realised with a start. So did the soldiers who were forming a wide circle around the group, weapons pointing inward.

Ami hid her face in her palm and groaned "Good going." Why had she given into the impulse to save him?

"So it's true?" Snyder stammered in disbelief. "Aren't Keepers supposed to be huge and monstrous, like Arachne?"

The Baron stalked toward them, sliding open his visor. His bushy, seared eyebrows were furrowed in anger. "So the little witch is a Keeper, huh? Here no doubt to get rid of a rival and loot her dungeon. Placed that fake acolyte close to me so that-"

"I'm not fake! It's not tru-" Snyder started to protest, hyperventilating.

"QUIET, villain! It also makes sense now that the only survivors of the frontline team are your so-called 'captors'."

"That's not what happened!" "We didn't kno-"

Tired of being ignored, the Reaper interrupted, amusement in his voice "Oops, was that supposed to be a secret, *Keeper*? Don't worry, there is an easy way to salvage the situation."

Ami threw him an irritated and dubious look.

Grinning, the beast continued "That is, KILL THEM ALL!"

The Baron raised his sabre "Incidentally, fiend, I was thinking exactly the same thing. MEN, GET THEM!"

"No, don't!" "This is a misunderstanding!" "Mercury, tell them this all your fault!"

Mercury did nothing of the sort. Instead, she raised her hands, and the forces of good gasped in fright when the area disappeared under dense, cold fog. "Save your breath and RUN!"

Grinning like the maniac he was, the Reaper raised his scythe to start carving a way through the soldiers between his Keeper and the exit. He was rather surprised when a wave of force blew him off his feet and threw him at the enemy formation, rolling over the floor like a living bowling ball. Pulling Cathy along and blurting out an apology whenever she stepped on a fallen soldier by accident, Ami fled toward the broken-down doors. Cathy seemed utterly stunned by the turn of events, nearly as much as Snyder. The red-headed priest was being ushered along by Jered, who proved to be surprisingly adaptable when it came to saving his own skin.

Behind them, in the mist, the Baron bellowed "AFTER THEM!"

"My Lord, we can't see them!" the soldiers were understandably reluctant to charge blindly into a fog that contained not only a legendary horned reaper, but also a Keeper.

"Wizards! Do something to get rid of this nuisance! I will have my trophy!"

"I ~huff~ still think we should have ~pant~ stayed around and explained-" Snyder was having trouble keeping pace with the others, not being used to much physical exertion.

"Because having a rational discussion with a man who considers head-butting *that* a good idea is certain to work!" Cathy replied sourly, pointing at the horned reaper jogging alongside the group. The demon was grumbling about being denied his fun, but had given up on trying to stay behind by 'accident', because whenever he did, Ami just dragged him along with invisible chains.

"What's up with that, anyway? I thought he was supposed to be

unstoppable. Sure didn't look like that when old Leopold had a go at him," Snyder remarked, with a wary look at the red creature.

The Reaper muttered something indistinguishable.

"What was that?" Ami asked.

"I said 'My skills might be a little bit rusty after centuries of disuse'," he hissed angrily. "What of it?"

Sailor Mercury suppressed the urge to face-palm, if only because doing that while running wasn't safe. The beast had just slacked off for centuries? Not even Usagi was that bad!

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Escape from Arachne's Dungeon

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"I think they are catching up," Cathy wheezed as the group sprinted up the blood-slick stairs leading out of the amphitheatre.

Ami's fog was forming wafting banks below them as they emerged from its depths. The staircase was broad enough to allow all five of them to run besides each other, but instead, the three heroes were keeping to its left side. On the right trotted the Reaper, clearing a deep crack in the stone with an easy leap. "Why are we running? Just transport us back to the dungeon if you don't want to fight," the red demon suggested, steaming breath shooting from his nostrils.

"Can't transport them," Mercury explained with a hand gesture towards the fugitive heroes, whose footsteps were sounding right behind her.

"So what? Just leave them behind. They look worthless anyway, especially the short fat one," the demon continued, undeterred.

Ami's reply was a moment late as she had to step around the near-flattened body of one of the soldiers who had gotten in the way of the enlarged spider earlier.

"I can't just leave them behind! It's your fault they are being chased in the first place!"

"While your concern for our well-being is touching," Jered interrupted even as the group cleared the final steps of the staircase and arrived on the amphitheatre's top floor, "do you actually have any idea where we are going?"

Ami stopped at the top of the stairs and crossed her arms before unleashing her magical attack at the masonry. With satisfaction, she watched the slope turn into an ice-covered slide. Below, a strong wind was blowing out of the huge opening where the black gates had been and clearing away her mist. She shook her head. "I was

more interested in getting away from them," she answered pointing at the armoured soldiers pouring out of the heart chamber, lead by a large figure with a whipping purple plume on its helmet. "We can't go the way the soldiers came in, it's bound to be guarded, so we'll have to backtrack our path. Now hurry!"

Fortunately, none of the heroes aside from Snyder seemed inclined to argue. "I shouldn't have to run away from them in the first place," the redhead whined, "what did I do to deserve this?"

"You are welcome to stay behind," the Reaper snorted at the young man, making him shut up with a whimper.

"So where exactly are we going?" Cathy demanded, running alongside the blue-haired girl with a practised pace. "It wouldn't do if we ended up in a dead end. We can't hide in here forever!"

Above, the light of the glowing threads that illuminated the area was dying down, and darkness started to settle on the dungeon. From behind came angry shouts as the pursuers were forced to use the staircase further away instead of the slippery one.

"Now that Arachne is gone, I can call in imps to dig us a new exit," Ami reassured the blonde. In front of her visor, the long, winding corridor started to fade into grey tones. She heard her companions stumble more and more often while running over the cracked tiles.

"Argh. Slow down! You and your beast may be able to see in the dark, but we sure can't!" Jered protested, after an unfortunate misstep sent him stumbling into the dirt. "Snyder! Make a light or something!"

"...associating with a Keeper and a horned reaper, of all things. Going to be stoned for heresy..." the portly man mumbled, white robes fluttering behind him as he moved forward.

"SNAP OUT OF IT!" Jered shouted, grabbing the acolyte by the collar and shaking him. He couldn't see the portly man's expression, but he seemed to relax a bit in the taller man's grip.

"Oh, oh, of course. Light. Why didn't I think of it?" the priest in

training muttered an incantation, and suddenly, one of his rings started glowing bright white.

As the corridor narrowed, Ami suddenly stopped. "Wait a moment. This is a good place to slow our pursuers down." Two imps appeared out of nowhere, plopping down next to her. Their short blue mini-dresses, white leotards, and frilly ribbons drew some raised eyebrows and disbelieving snorts. Cathy inclined her head and looked at Mercury oddly. The blue-haired girl blushed faintly. "I'll explain later. You! Dig a deep trench here so no one can pass! You! dig out the ceiling so it drops and blocks the corridor!"

Stone chips went flying as the imps enthusiastically attacked the rock with their picks. Soon, the diminutive creatures disappeared in the darkness as Snyder's circle of light left them behind.

"I think that should hold them for a while," Jered commented when the crash of a rock slide sounded behind them, shaking the surrounding rock with the intensity of its echoing impact. "We should take the opportunity to look around a bit to see if we can't find anything useful."

"We are running for our lives and you are thinking about looting the place?" Ami asked incredulously.

The wavy-haired man nodded. "Naturally. This predicament you got us into has left all of us destitute. All we have left is what we are carrying on us," he continued, indicating the filthy rags he was wearing with both hands.

Ami looked down at the floor. "I'm sorry. Maybe you are right." She adjusted her visor to penetrate deeper into the rock so she would spot any potential valuables.

"Oh for darkness' sake, " the Reaper butted in, "You are rich, Keeper! Just *hire* them! I have no intention of going on a boring scavenger hunt!"

Ami faltered in her step, surprised that the demon had raised a good point for once. "Well, I suppose..." she began, looking at the three adventurers speculatively.

"What? Serve a Keeper? No wa- hmmpf." Cathy's outraged cry was suddenly muffled by Jered's long-fingered hand slipping over her lips. The blonde glared at him, while the lanky man looked at Mercury instead.

"Would you mind letting us discuss that among ourselves for a bit? Privately?" he asked, making a shooing motion toward the mud-covered blue-haired girl and the Reaper. Ami nodded and started walking away, followed by the horned demon. Cathy's voice faded away in the tunnel. "Jered, what were you thinking..."

Ami sighed. It hurt that the revelation that she was a Keeper had apparently brushed away any trust as if it had never been. She couldn't really blame them, she supposed. If Keepers like Arachne were the norm, rather than the- what was this? Something was moving on her sensors, a few metres through the rock of the left wall. She adjusted the settings, and the image came into sharper focus. Her eyes widened in surprised recognition before narrowing into red-glowing slits. An imp dropped down out of thin air, startling the red demon who was leaning bored against the wall. Immediately, the bug-eyed creature started hacking away at the unfinished rock in a frenzy, sending up a cloud of dust that billowed into the narrow corridor. After tunnelling through barely half a metre of rock, it broke through into the chamber behind, sending a spray of crumbling debris and stone spilling on the expensive carpet below.

The occupant of the room was sitting in a high-backed armchair with red cushions, and was staring at the intruder with wide eyes. His black hair would have been standing on end in surprise if it hadn't been so heavy from all the oil in it. Abruptly, the violet-robed warlock stood up when Ami stepped through the dust cloud and glowering at him. The blue-haired girl stared at the lanky man through blazing red eyes, taking in the tacky décor of the opulent chamber in passing. The stone arches weren't so bad, but did they really have to be studded with skulls everywhere? Her inner bookworm salivated at the sight of the shelves full of tomes that covered the walls, hiding the abstract tapestries. She returned her full attention to the evil wizard whom she had just interrupted - doing what? - tormenting a particularly large and ugly frog floating in a soap bubble above the table? She shook her head at the sadist's strange tastes.

"You could have used the door," the warlock stated with a nod toward one corner of the room, where the polished wood of an entrance gleamed in the fireplace's light. From the outside, it looked no different than any other piece of the wall. "From this," he pointed at the fuku-clad imp, "I brilliantly conclude that you are here to secure my not inconsiderable abilities for a Keeper with rather strange taste in uniforms."

Ami responded with a well-aimed Shabon Spray Freezing. Alas, the magician's hands, which had been concealed within the long sleeves of his skull-embroidered robe, shot up, already glowing greenish with gathered power. As if drawn by a magnet, the blue ray of concentrated bubbles tracked the wizard's outstretched hand, which traced a horizontal circle in the air as he spun around his own axis until his extended finger was pointing back at Ami. With an "Eep!" of surprise, she threw herself out of the way of her own attack, rolling off her momentum on the thick carpet.

"You didn't really think you could catch the great necromancer Nero with a trick like that twice, did you, little girl?" the man boasted, goatee bobbing up and down smugly as he spoke.

"Sic him!"

The thundering noise of something huge storming through the new entrance into his room alerted the warlock to the arrival of a new opponent. The Reaper had to duck to bring his muscular red bulk through the opening, and the maniacal grin on his face had returned full-force as he stalked into the chamber, scythe blade raised over his shoulders.

"Oh dear." The expression on the warlock's face at the sight of her red demon was priceless, in Ami's opinion. His skin had lost all colour, and the pupils in his blood-shot eyes contracted into little dots while his eyebrows tried to climb into his hairline. Survival instincts roused the man from his stupor, and he managed to just duck under first swipe of the monster's weapon, losing half of his high-necked collar in the process. He revealed pale, gangly legs as he gathered up his robe and made a mad dash for the half-open door in the back of his lair. Naturally, the horned reaper took off after him with a roar of glee. The door slamming in the beast's face didn't

even slow him down, and the unfortunate obstacle exploded into kindling as the demon just kept going. He looked around the small bedroom, head rolling from left to right on the bull-like neck. Under the bed? Swish! Feathers went flying as the furniture was split cleanly in two, mattress, supports and all. Not there. Maybe the wardrobe? Two X-shaped cuts and a new heap of wooden planks later, there was still no trace of the warlock. The Reaper was starting to get annoyed, and the sound of furniture being reduced indiscriminately to debris echoed through the complex.

"... so you see, the only way we could currently clear our name is by showing up with the corpse of the Keeper. While I'm sure I could slip in a dagger before she knew what was going on, we wouldn't survive that pet demon of hers. Besides, cold blooded murder is ..."

Hmm, those were his escaped prisoners, huddled together and discussing something in whispers. Some short, portly guy had joined them and was glowing too, exposing just exactly how filthy his companions were. Someone had done some nice healing on the burn victim, though.

"...still, a Keeper! My brothers will want to kill me! Though either she's the best actress I have ever encountered, or something's not right. You wouldn't expect a Keeper to puke her stomach out from watching a torture session. I don't like..."

Ah, the blonde girl. Still holding on to the hammer too. None of the three were aware of his presence, it seemed.

"... and we'll need a place to lay low. Wanted posters will be going up everywhere ..."

"... family will disown me... "

"... damned ... at least find ... dungeon is ... redeem ourselves ..."

The voices were fading into the distance now. He had gotten past without them ever noticing he was around. Nero would have snickered if his current form had allowed. Instead, he silently

slithered onwards. Whoever had written that turning into a snake never helped was an idiot of the highest calibre. Sure, escaping through the drain of his own sink wasn't dignified, but it beat the alternative. The scaly warlock came to a sudden stop. Oh great, rock slide blocking exit. Oh well. He wasn't a great wizard for nothing. There was a strange shifting and rustling of cloth before a geeky-looking man in gaudy robes replaced the snake. He cracked his knuckles and pulled up his sleeves, then started a short chant accompanied by complicated arcane gestures. Something spiny and smoking appeared in his hand, and he tossed it at the roadblock before covering his ears. With a loud bang, rocks and debris went flying, and the warlock peered through the rain of falling rubble at his route to safety. From the other side, a wall of armoured figures plastered in white stone dust peered back, just as surprised to see him as he was to see them. Nero groaned. Today just wasn't his day.

Jered and the others found Mercury within an opulent room, standing in front of long shelves filled with books. She was touching one after the other, and whenever she did, the tome would disappear into thin air. Behind a broken-down door in the back, he could see the Reaper sulking within a completely devastated chamber. The weasel-featured man walked over to the blue-haired girl, clearing his throat. "We have decided to accept your offer."

Ami looked up from her activity and turned toward the others, who were slowly entering the room through the new passage. She could see that Jered's face was unreadable as usual, while Cathy's lips were nothing but a thin line and her fists were clenching and unclenching, as if she was fighting with herself. Snyder just slumped his shoulders, looking defeated. As the redhead walked past the table, the floating bubble holding the green frog burst. With a questioning croak, the animal hopped toward the acolyte, who looked down at it quizzically. The improbably large frog let out another croak, and then a thrust of the powerful hind legs catapulted it on the man's shoulder, where it settled down within the red folds of his stole. "Strange." Even this oddness couldn't shake the man out of his funk, and he joined Cathy and Jered, forming a short line in

front of Ami. He sighed "Well then, get on with it, Keeper."

CROAK! Suddenly, Ami's face was full of cold, slimy amphibian, and she backed away, eyes crossing as they tried to focus on the animal clinging to her nose and kicking at her chin. Her back hit the shelf, which nearly toppled, and on the rebound showered her with a hail of books.The three heroes looked down at the shifting pile of occult tomes out of which protruded one white-gloved fist holding an ill-tempered amphibian.

"I must admit that I was expecting a somewhat more dignified ceremony," Jered commented while helping Mercury out from under the literary avalanche. "What is it with that thing, anyway?"

Ami shrugged and looked at the huge frog, which was now sucking on her thumb. She had the vague impression that it was trying to bite her and just hadn't realised yet that it lacked teeth. She'd deal with the strange animal later. Instinctively, she knew that she should symbolically pay her prospective underlings to seal the deal, and summoned three gold coins from her treasure chamber. "No need for some elaborate ritual. Just take a coin each if you want to enter my service."

Jered was the first to take her up on the offer, and he took the gold with barely any hesitation. Snyder was the second, plucking the coin from her extended hand with a limp gesture. Cathy took the longest before reaching for the money, and the blonde's hand was shaking in trepidation as her fingers closed around the precious metal. Any time a coin left Ami's hand, she felt a new connection form between her and the recipient, similar to the one she shared with the Reaper. She nodded. "Good. I am able to transport all of us out of here now. Now help me with those books, please." With united efforts, all the tomes were soon gathered up and bound together, allowing Ami to transfer the bundles in bulk. Once done, the four humans, one demon, and one annoying frog attached to Ami's ear disappeared from Arachne's dead dungeon.

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Strategy Meeting

Originally on 2009-10-17T23:14:00

Ami and her companions arrived within a bare chamber of her dungeon. With the bright white and blue tones of its walls, it felt much more cheerful than Arachne's unfinished tunnels. As soon as the young Keeper's feet made contact with the smooth chequerboard-patterned floor tiles, her muscles seemed to relax, and some of the built-up tension left them. Her underlings, old and new, seemed to have more difficulty with the arrival. Even the Reaper stumbled and had to put a hoof forward to restore his balance. Snyder fared the worst of the lot, for the portly man appeared half a metre above the ground and botched his landing. Ami hurried over and extended her hand, helping him to pull himself back to his feet. "Sorry about that. I don't have much practice transporting anyone but myself or the imps," the girl explained.

"It was an... interesting experience," Jered commented cautiously. Next to him, the long blond strands of Cathy's hair were whipping left and right as she moved her head to take in the sparse features of the room. Her gaze swept over the azure murals interrupting the white brick pattern at regular intervals, took in the vaulted arches supporting the ceiling, skipped over the door-less exits at each end of the rectangular chamber, and finally came to rest on the disorderly stack of books in the far corner of the room.

"It's, err, fairly clean," the swordswoman noted, obviously reaching to find something complimentary to say. It immediately brought to mind the fact that she herself, as well as Jered and Ami, were covered in drying mud and worse.

"Though it is still is a dungeon," her brown-haired boyfriend added, inspecting the vaguely suggestive female silhouettes that formed the murals. "Interesting choice of decorations."

"The imps just keep adding them to any blank wall they can find," Ami sighed, busy with removing the fat frog from her ear. The animal

had clamped down on one of her small blue earrings, which added some pain to the general discomfort of being attacked by a slimy amphibian. Both of her hands closed around her diminutive attacker when she finally got a firm grip on it, and the frog croaked angrily as she held it out in front of her. "This isn't normal frog behaviour."

Snyder, who ducked his head nervously whenever a dampened beat of the dungeon heart rumbled through the underground, ventured a guess "Well, well. It is possible that this is not a frog at all, but another victim of the evil warlock, transformed into this unappealing form."

Ami's irritated expression turned into one of pity. "Really? Do you know how to turn it back?"

"The traditional means would be a kiss by a prince or princess," Jered supplied with a grin, "fortunately, being a Keeper should make you some kind of Princess of Darkness."

Ami narrowed her eyes and eyed the squirming animal dubiously. The frog seemed just as offended by the suggestion. Sweating nervously, Snyder nearly choked. *Jered, what are you thinking, teasing a Keeper?* "That's just a children's story," the red-headed acolyte blurted out quickly. Transformation magic usually isn't permanent. Just give it some time."

"Oh, good." Great. Now she had to take care of a large frog who could turn back into a hero at any moment and had already made it abundantly clear that it didn't like her. Ami was tired after all the misadventures of the day. "You, imp!" She motioned one of her servants over. "Put this frog down at the bottom of the deepest pit you can find. Gently. Make sure that the pit is safe and no harm comes to the frog!" The amphibian gave a croak of protest when it was unceremoniously dropped into the sack the imp was holding open, but to no avail.

"Was that a good idea?" Cathy asked, watching the back of the small servant as it scurried off. Ami shrugged "I can't keep carrying it around, and the imp is going to do exactly what it was told, so there is no danger. Besides, I'll be keeping an eye on it from afar."

"I see," the blonde gulped at that reminder of the shorter girl's abilities. "So, what do we do now?"

"All of you take a bath," the Reaper ordered, leaning on his scythe. "I have met bile demons who smelled better than you sorry bunch. What did you do, take a dive in a septic tank?"

The team's response was pre-empted by new arrivals. "Look! Told you we has intruders!" an ugly green head was poking in through the left entrance. A tiara with a blue gem in its centre rested on its forehead.

Another face with long triangular ears appeared above the first one in the door frame. "Not intruders! They with Big Ugly!" The Reaper sneered in the goblins' direction at the nickname.

"They all big uglies," a third goblin joined the others, also with a tiara on its head. "Look! Scary Eyes Girl here too!"

"Idiot! Her eyes blue, not red!" the first one corrected. "What they doing here?"

"This girl happens to be the Keeper," the red demon informed them, pointing down at Ami. He wasn't in the mood to deal with goblin nonsense right now. Or ever.

The largest goblin leaned forward, blinking incredulously. "Oh, me see. Big Ugly think we stupid! She too harmless looking!"

As one, the adventurers turned to look at Ami and took a step away. Even the hiding goblins peering into the room seemed to duck down a bit. The Reaper alone stayed where he was, observing through half-lidded yellow eyes. Ami's eyebrows shot up as everyone kept staring at her with bated breath. "What?" she asked into the silence, crossing her arms in front of her chest defensively.

"Aren't- Aren't you going to convince them by revealing your grotesque and horrifying true form now?" Snyder asked, a hint of disappointment quivering in his voice.

The three goblin heads peering around the door frame nodded. "Yes. Is traditional."

Ami blinked at the expectant expressions surrounding her, then closed her mouth with an audible snap. She turned her head and threw a pleading look at the Reaper, who just snickered at her predicament. "But I'm human! I really look like this!"

The goblins discussed this amongst themselves. "Prove you Keeper," they demanded.

Hanging her head, Ami gave the trio a shove with her insubstantial hand, and the gangly three humanoids fell face-first into the room. "Happy now?"

The heroes gaped as they caught sight of the green creatures' bodies: each of them was wearing an adjusted version of Sailor Mercury's uniform. Sure, a few of the bows were damaged, missing, or displaced, but the overall frilly effect remained.

"I bet this wasn't what you were expecting when she told you that all the girls where she came from wore something like this," Cathy joked at Jered's expense when she recovered from her surprise. For once, the wavy haired man was having trouble recovering his wits faster than her. She rounded on Ami and put her hands on her hips. "I hope you aren't planning on putting me into one of those outfits too!"

Ami waved her hands in denial, palms facing outward. "No, no. They weren't even supposed to get that outfit. Maybe the dungeon heart malfunctioned or someth-"

"The dungeon heart *malfunctioned*?" Jered shrieked, his voice taking on an unusually high pitch. "Don't tell me we signed up with a dungeon keeper whose dungeon heart isn't working right!"

"Well, that might explain a few things", Snyder speculated, looking at Ami, and using one hand to thoughtfully massage the stubble on his chin.

"I don't think there's anything important wrong with it," Ami defended the heart, feeling oddly protective about the artefact. "I can't be entirely sure it's in pristine condition after all the centuries it was in here, of course, but so far, it hasn't had any strange hiccups yet.

Aside from my transformation," she admitted. Then her expression brightened. "Actually, that's a really fast and thorough way to get us all clean if you don't mind-"

"NO!" The Reaper stepped in front of Ami, leaned over her with fangs bared and eyes flashing, and growled "Keeper, if I have to put up with this again, I will try my best to kill each and every living thing in this dungeon!"

Ami nervously took a step back. "Err, well, ..." She straightened, a mischievous gleam appearing in her red-flashing eyes "Why don't you go and heat the bath water, then?" The Reaper jerked as if pulled upward and disappeared, accompanied by the soft whistling of air rushing in to fill the vacuum where he had been.

"A- are you sure you can keep that thing under control?" Snyder asked, shivering. He should have never went along with this. He really had to keep reminding himself that the blue-haired girl *was* a Keeper. One that was apparently scary enough to have the allegiance of a horned reaper, even if it was an uneasy alliance.

"Even if he rebelled, my ice attack could stop him with a single hit," Ami tried to calm down the redhead, who didn't seem convinced.

"How comes you have a horned reaper serving you in the first place?" Jered wanted to know. "You don't really seem to get along."*Or that competent.*

"It's a long story," Ami sighed. "Let's get cleaned up first."

Ami's dungeon did not contain a bath yet, so she added one. This wasn't so difficult, as all it required was several shallow basins, little more than pits in the ground. One reservoir for the cold water, one for the hot, two gender-separated pools with a dividing wall, and another empty reservoir to serve as a drain. Everything was connected by a few narrow channels that could be opened or closed at will with a stone slider. The necessary water she had conjured herself. There was probably a more elegant magical solution than having her minion fireball the warm-water reservoir to heat it up, but

the current set-up was working out satisfactory. With a contented sigh, Ami slipped deeper into the liquid until it covered her up to her neck. Steam clouds were rising from the pool into the clammy dungeon air, obscuring Cathy at the other end of the pool. It had taken a lot of scrubbing and a few changes of the bath water, but at long last, everyone felt and smelled human again.

"So, to summarise, aside from the dungeon heart, you own a lot of empty corridors, a chicken farm, a library that until recently only had three books in it, a few dark corners full of beetles and goblin huts, and your only decent room has been claimed by a horned reaper?" Jered's rather chagrined voice penetrated the separating wall.

Ami blushed faintly, which had nothing at all to do with the fact that she was having a hard time not focusing her Keeper sight on whoever was talking to allow the men on the other side some privacy, oh no. She protested "Well, there are a lot of traps, too. And the treasure chamber."

"The gold is the only bright spot in this mess," the brown-haired man sighed. "As for your imp-operated traps - well, you only have four imps, and they are busy with other things most of the time, right? We are sooo doomed."

There was a splash as Ami sat up. "Please don't be so pessimistic. Anyone who wanted to come after us would have to find us first, and I'm not doing anything to draw attention. This place doesn't even have any exits to the surface." She had collapsed the one she had used, after all.

Snyder's voice cut in from the other side, still nervous "Ah, but I'm afraid you are wrong about that. This active dungeon heart of yours is pumping out dark power from whatever hells it is connected to with every heartbeat, and anything you don't use up spills out and taints the environment. After a while the effects will become highly visible."

Ami froze, remembering the spot of withered forest she had noticed when she took a first look at the surface. "Um, with side effects, do you mean things like plants dying?"

"Yes, that would be a common example of misfortune associated with a dungeon heart in the area," the acolyte confirmed.

"Oh. That's not good," Ami admitted after a short pause. "How likely is it that the Baron will remember which village you picked me up in?"

At this point, Cathy stirred. "It's almost inevitable that one of his pen-pushers has gathered up and filed the letter from the Mayor to the Baron," the blonde stated tiredly.

"What?" Ami stood up with a jolt, startling the other woman. "How fast would he be here looking for the dungeon then, in your opinion?"

"Well, he's going to be busy investigating what remains of Arachne's dungeon, cleaning out the survivors and rewarding his loyal soldiers, but he'll want to move fast. Getting his force ready to march after the victory feast will take a day or two, the journey another two," Jered pondered from across the wall, "I think we have barely a week, if this dungeon is anywhere close to where we first met." He did not sound happy.

"We don't have any time to lose, then! Snyder, you mentioned something about using up the dark power? How do I do that?" the blue-haired girl got a sinking feeling in her stomach.

From through the thin stone, the dampened voice of the acolyte answered "Well, ahem, I wouldn't call myself an expert on dark artefacts, but I would assume that you had to cast a lot of spells or to use it to fuel magical mechanisms here in the dungeon."

Stepping out of the pool, Ami looked at the washed fuku resting on the ground, still stained from the experiences of the night before. She doubted that she was ever going to be able to get it clean again, and wished she could just re-transform to replace it. Unfortunately, she was taking the Reaper's threat very seriously. "Hmm, I don't really know any extremely power-intensive spells."

Within the boiler room, the red demon raised an eyebrow when he overheard that statement. He could have sworn that the freeze spell

was rather high magic. But the Keeper was continuing with her talk.

"I think it's about time we had a proper planning session. Snyder, could you please work out some wards that will keep the energy from going to the surface? Cathy, Snyder, please try to think of things that we can do to improve our situation."After a moment, she added, loud enough that the monster in the adjacent room could hear it "If you have any suggestions that don't involve killing everything, I will want to hear them later too."

Ami had created yet another new room, this one with a large round stone table in its centre, surrounded by seats. Mercury symbols adorned the walls, but aside from that it seemed rather empty. As war planning sessions went, this one was actually proceeding fairly smoothly, at least when compared to what she was used to. Usagi and Rei would already be fighting over something trivial, while Luna would be trying and failing to get them to listen. Ami wondered how her friends were doing before turning her thoughts back onto more pressing matters. What made this meeting slightly awkward was the fact that everyone, except Snyder and the Reaper, was wearing togas made of a coarse red material. Their former sewage-soaked outfits had proven to be unsalvageable, and now the red demon's throne room was missing some more curtains.

Cathy hid a yawn behind her hand, looking about as tired as Ami felt. Nobody had gotten any sleep since that night on the road, and that had been more than twenty-four hours ago. "... so I'll see about drilling the goblins and beetles into something resembling combat shape once you provide the necessary facilities, Snyder will be working on the warding scheme, and Jered will be drawing as many maps as he can remember," the blonde gave a short recap of the results, "while you will be expanding the dungeon and going over these books." She gestured toward the tomes looted from Arachne's library, which had been sorted into three piles. The useful, the potentially interesting, and the outright evil. The latter was by far the largest of the three, and the horned reaper, long since bored with the debate, was browsing through it with interest. "Oh yeah, and then we need to decide on what to do about getting more recruits..."

Ami nodded, typing on the keyboard of her computer resting in front of her. "I think I'll start with studying the imp creation spell, and then continue on searching for one of those portals the Reaper mentioned." Looking at the dark circles under her companion's eyes, she decided to call it a night. "Thank you all. I think we are done here for today. I'll repeat once more that I didn't intend to drag you all into this, so if you want to leave, I will do what I can to move you somewhere safe.."

"And risk the bounty hunters? Thanks, but no thanks," Jered stated as he stood up. "I really could use a good night's sleep. Is it night? It's so hard to tell the time in here."

The new bedrooms for the human inhabitants of the dungeon were all on the same corridor and modelled on Ami's own at her mother's apartment. Not too lavish, but still unusual in this world, if Cathy's gasp when she opened the door to her room was any indication. Of course, there was neither electric light or heating (yet), so a fireplace provided an acceptable substitute. Ami was about to undress and get ready for bed when the Reaper let himself in unbidden, closing the door behind him with a slam as he stalked in.

"What are you doing here!? Explain yourself!" Ami nearly shrieked, whirling to face the demon. He was carrying a black-bound tome under his left arm. The right held his ever-present scythe.

"I came to talk about your most serious weakness as a Keeper, and didn't want to do so in front of the hired help," the demon sneered.

Ami crossed her arms in front of her chest as she looked up at the beast. "And that is?"

"You don't know how to create new dungeon hearts, and thus are stuck in this useless location. Even if you beat back the first assault, the next ones will just be bigger, and your enemies will know where you are," the Reaper explained, as if it should be obvious.

Ami looked thoughtful for a moment. "Well, where can I learn how to make one? Are there any books?"

The Reaper laughed, actually laughed, at her. " 'Are there any books?' she asks. No, of course there are NOT. The knowledge of how to make dungeon hearts is one of the most treasured and well-protected lores in the Underworld. Nearly every Keeper has to re-invent it for himself, through arduous and dedicated study that only barely fits within a mortal lifetime, and only succeeds if said individual has the approval of the dark gods. Nobody would commit such a treasure to a book, as all that would serve would be to produce rivals!"

"Well then, do you have any suggestions on how to fix this, or are you only here to taunt me?" Ami snapped.

"I wouldn't be wasting my time here if I didn't have a solution," he threw the book in his arms onto her bed, where it bounced once on the springy mattress. "Obviously, you will have to get the knowledge from another Keeper, not that they would be inclined to share in any way. Fortunately, this book, which you were so quick to discard, could allow you to rip what you need right out of some pathetic fool's mind!"

"Possession?" Ami asked dubiously, leafing through the dark tome despite herself. As usual, written knowledge proved to be near-irresistible.

"Indeed. When possessing one of their underlings, a Dungeon Keeper can make full use of their skills and abilities. Thus, should you possess another Keeper, you would be able to create a new dungeon heart. The fun part," here the Reaper's grin became murderous, "is getting another Keeper to submit and agree to becoming your underling in the first place. You'll need to find one with no master and no spare hearts, too, then beat him so badly he sees no other option. Do you think you can manage this in less than a week, *Keeper*?" the monster taunted.

"Hmm," Ami muttered, putting one finger on her lips and wetting it so she could thumb through the book more easily. This was actually quite interesting, theory-wise, even if it contained a great number of unpleasant rants, ramblings, and anecdotes of the researcher who developed the spell. The final incantation seemed rather short and simple though, not really worthy of the many introductions that

surrounded it.

Disappointed with the lack of reaction, the horned demon continued his taunts "Of course, with the way you are behaving, you will need a lot of practice before you can even think of taking over the mind of a willing minion, much less of a Keeper, who, even if subjugated, will do his best to resist your intrusion. In fact, I doubt you have the necessary mental fortitude."

Ami looked up, her eyes flashing red. She had some misgivings about this spell. Forcing total control on someone somehow seemed wrong, even if they agreed to it. Doing it for practice... she'd have to loathe the target a whole lot. Or maybe use it as punishment. Hmmm. Her eyes narrowed a bit and the corners of her mouth twitched up into an unnerving smile as she focused on the red demon. He actually took a step back.

"Keeper, I hope you aren't intending to try this on me! Your puny human mind couldn't hope to stand against the resistance I can put up!" he snarled angrily.

Ami's mouth widened into a toothy grin. "Perfect practice, in other words!"

"KEEPE-" In front of the horned reaper's eyes, the toga-clad form of the blue-haired girl blurred and darkened, turning into a coil of black lightning that unfurled and shot into him, arcing over his reddish skin. He staggered as if struck when something icy and determined slammed into his defences, only to meet the fires of his red hot fury. He could feel the Keeper's power trying to seize control, insinuating itself through the same connections that bound him to the dungeon heart, and blocked its path, pitting his own magic against it. Suddenly, he felt a numbing mental coldness rushing in like a battering ram, from a different direction, an even stronger blow than the attack that was still ongoing. *What? This couldn't have been a distra-*

Ami felt a brief moment of disorientation, followed by a burst of elation when her latest mental push just seemed to just break through the demon's resistance and shoved his presence aside. She looked down at herself, feeling strange and off-balance, but all

opposition was gone as if it had never been. Yes, those were undoubtedly the beast's red pectorals, slightly whitened by hoarfrost. She felt a sudden urge to cover her chest. While she knew intellectually that she was in a male body, it wasn't easy fighting down instincts acquired during a lifetime. Unfortunately, there seemed to be nothing of the Reaper that she could access. No skills, no memories... no gain at all. Typical for one of his plans, she concluded sourly. Suddenly, she heard an inarticulate feminine scream of rage behind her, and was forcibly introduced to the drawbacks of being in a male body, through the inconsiderate application of a slender knee to her - or was that his - loincloth-covered crotch.

Yellow eyes watering, Ami dropped to her knees, and felt a light form jump on her back, or at least try to. With a loud grunt, her assailant stumbled backward. Wearing the Reaper's body, Ami turned to see a tiny blue-haired girl - herself, she realised dumbly - tear off the red toga that had caused her to stumble.

"KEEPER! BY ALL THE DARK GODS, WHAT DID YOU DO? FIX THIS! FIX THIS RIGHT NOW!" the girl screamed, her expression a mask of fury and bared teeth that was totally unfamiliar on the face that Ami saw every day in the mirror.

In shock, the Keeper took a step away from what was her own body advancing on her. "Reaper? Is that you?"

In response, the Reaper-wearing-Ami's-body lunged, catching the true owner of the body by surprise. Ami felt her shoulders hit the ground as she fell on her back. It almost didn't hurt in this body. Neither did the angry punches of what could only be the Reaper, who was venting his anger by climbing on Ami's chest and raining down blows. Realising that she wasn't in any real danger, the displaced senshi calmed down a bit. This side-effect had been rather unexpected. Was she really that small, she wondered as she watched her own body flail ineffectually, ignoring her unmotivated defences. How could she best restrain the demon wearing her flesh like this? She didn't want to cause any harm to what was basically herself, and this body she was in was was a lot stronger and more durable than what she was used to. Her contemplations were interrupted when she looked past the angry Reaper sitting on top of

her and saw the bedroom door burst open, the space filling with the frightened faces of her three new hirelings, accompanied by a few goblins too. "Mercury, are you all right? We heard screa-"

Ami watched as Cathy's mouth dropped open and her eyes widened. The faces of her companions mirrored the expression. All three of them blushed deeply, making Ami realise what the situation had to look like to them. Here she was, looking like the Reaper's, lying on her back, while her possessed, sweating and naked form was straddling the red body. The beast wearing her flesh had moved on to attempted strangling, and was still screaming at the top of his, now her, lungs "...ONLY YOU COULD MESS UP LIKE THIS! I SHOULD-" The Reaper finally noticed that he had lost the attention of his target, a fact that made him nearly apoplectic with rage, and turned his head to look over his left shoulder at the new arrivals. Dishevelled Blue bangs hung straight down, covering the face in darkness except for a flashing red eye and the gleam of white teeth. "WHAT?" the Reaper snapped, spittle flying.

"Um, never mind," Jered said, being the first to re-boot his brain. "We'll come back later." The intruders fled, except for one especially slow goblin, who was grinning and chanting "Go go Keeper!" and had to be yanked out by his more alert companions before the door closed.

Ami felt the urge to bang her head against the ground in frustration and embarrassment, but the horned reaper in her body stood up and turned around, giving the impression that he was about to hunt down and murder anyone who had seen his strange predicament, current body be damned. Ami just managed to grab a slender ankle with a huge red and scaled hand. The Reaper went down, making Ami wince at the potential damage to her own body, but she couldn't just let him run through the halls naked and doing who-knows-what. "Calm down! CALM DOWN! How am I supposed to fix this if you don't cooperate?"

The argument finally seemed to get through, and the horned reaper in female form calmed down. Or maybe it was just the fact that Ami was using her Keeper power to keep the irate demon's form immobilised. "Fine," he snapped in Ami's voice, "get on with it!"

The senshi tried, she really did. "And put some clothes on," she ordered, bidding for time when her first attempts showed little results.

The reaper grumbled in irritation, and there was a circle of fire, tongues of flame snaking their way upwards, and then the Ami-lookalike was dressed - in the Reaper's usual outfit, complete with scythe. While the huge conjured metal pauldrons, chain and amulet, loincloth, and pair of greaves were all tailored to fit the more human form quite well, a major problem remained with the attire. It did not come with a bra, shirt, or anything of the sort, and was thus proudly presenting Ami's assets to the world.

Ami blinked. "That was not really what I meant. And cover your chest too!"

"Fix this and do it yourself! I am getting impatient!" the Reaper stomped his foot angrily, making its metal armour rattle.

It didn't impress Ami in her looming form at all. *Do I really look that pathetic to him?* "Well, there seems to be a bit of a problem," she stammered, with a sheepish expression that looked rather out of place on a horned reaper's features. "It doesn't seem to work."

"ARGH!" the Reaper made another lunge for Ami, this time armed with a scythe, which changed the threat factor considerably. The faux horned reaper wisely made a run for it. At least the Reaper's human body was bound to tire out before this one, or so she hoped.

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Mad Science for Beginners

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Ami grinned smugly down at the Reaper, whose furious expression looked completely incongruous on the borrowed face of the blue-haired girl. She - for Ami had decided to use the appropriate pronouns for the body, rather than the spirit inhabiting it - was uncharacteristically not acting on her violent impulses and was glaring at her possessed body through red-flashing eyes instead, arms folded over her chest. Not that she had more violent options, as Ami had remembered after the first moment of panic that she - he? This was taking some getting used to - could just immobilise and disarm the neo-girl with his Keeper powers. He resumed leafing through the possession tome with large, unwieldy red fingers, grateful that the claws at their ends were surprisingly useful for this. "Hmm, yes. I think I see."

The Reaper looked up with sudden hope in her eyes. "Then hurry up and fix this!"

Payback time."Oh, I don't think I will." She savoured the Reaper's jaw dropping open as she drew her head back slightly in surprise.

"WHAT?"

"Well, I noticed that this body is not tired, as opposed to my own. If I don't have to sleep, then I have more time to prepare before the enemy arrives. Besides, you are much more manageable this way."

The Reaper clenched and unclenched her fists rapidly, going red in the face from anger. "You can't do that! That's MY body you have stolen! Give it BACK! This... this is unfair!"

Smug grins really came easily to this demon body, Ami thought as he loomed over the girl, feeling the skin covering his fangs recede. "So? I am a Keeper, as you like to point out so frequently. If you want this body back, you better start behaving, for example by covering up!" He pointed at the girl's bare chest, which was

quivering freely as the Reaper shook in rage. "Oh, and do try to take proper care of my body. I would be less inclined to return to damaged goods, you see!"

The Reaper's lips formed an angry pout as she simmered at the realisation of her own helplessness, and after a while, she hissed "FINE!" and stomped her foot. "Ow! Stupid, useless, *weak* girl body!" Before she could limp off, she felt herself picked up by the Keeper's invisible hand.

"Now go to my room and sleep. I will retrieve you when I need you." With that, Ami dropped his possessed body down on the soft bed in his own bedroom, hoping that the bluff had worked and that no harsher measures would be necessary. Having to watch your own body walk around, or worse, having to restrain it, was very disconcerting.

If turning the pages of a book was difficult with the meaty paws of a horned reaper, then handling the keys of the tiny Mercury computer was even worse. To Ami's relief, he had still been able to make use of the device. He probably shouldn't have been worried about that, as he had always been able to access the machine even in civilian form. His magical attacks, however... well, he technically wasn't in Sailor Mercury form, so the fact that his attempt to cast Shabon Spray Freezing had actually worked was surprising by itself. However, the effort required to do so had nearly floored him, and the pool of power slumbering within the dungeon heart seemed much reduced afterwards. He wondered if the Reaper's body was so fire-aspected that using ice magic required additional effort. As interesting as the question was, it would have to wait until later. Time was wasting, and he didn't intend to stay long in this body anyway, so the question was of low priority.

Ami mentally went over the list of current issues again. His primary goal, getting home, was unachievable with his current abilities. Even if he could do it in the limited time, he would be leaving Cathy, Snyder, and Jered to their fate, which most of them didn't really deserve. Researching a solution would drain invaluable time that could be used to deal with more pressing issues, the root cause of

which was the likelihood of the Baron showing up in less than a week. Normally, Ami's preferred response to this problem would have been to vacate the area. He didn't want to fight people who had done nothing wrong, but in this case, he regrettably had little choice. He was linked to the local dungeon heart, and it was too big to flee with. While he was reluctant to take the Reaper's words at face value, the fact that the destruction of a dungeon heart did bad things to the Keeper was pretty much incontrovertible after having watched what happened to Arachne. He wasn't entirely sure if the enemy Keeper had perished right there, or if whatever kind of creature she had been could even properly die, but it had been clear that she had been sucked into some kind of hellish other world.

Shivering involuntarily as he recalled the feel of that darkness, Ami sighed. He didn't want to die, doubly so if it meant going to hell undeservedly, something he didn't really want to think about a lot. As soon as the danger had passed, he would have to look into finding a way to disentangle himself from the dungeon heart and all the evil associated with it. Maybe Snyder's acolyte training would be helpful, but he rather doubted that, based on past performance. Right now, spending time on getting rid of the heart connection would be unhelpful, even counter-productive. Losing the dungeon heart would also cost him access to most of his resources, without deterring enemies in the slightest. With a sigh, he closed the file on that question. He really, really, hoped that this wasn't a mistake that would come back to haunt him in a week.

But enough of the unproductive fretting. He needed a way to survive the coming assault, and there were only two possibilities. Either he had to fend off the attack, hopefully without causing too much harm, or he had to acquire a new dungeon heart elsewhere. The latter option was more palatable, as it involved destroying another evil Keeper and not fighting innocents. Either way, more soldiers were required. At this point, he leaned back on his rock chair and looked at the vaulting stone ceiling with yellow eyes. What could he do about recruiting minions? More imps were a logical choice, they were obedient and required for any kind of fortification work. But fighters? Goblins were weak and impulsive, and he doubted their ability to not seriously injure whoever they were fighting, or whether they would even attempt to follow orders to that aim. Beetles and

spiders? Nearly the same problems, and he didn't know if they were smart enough to understand a command like that in the first place. Human mercenaries? She would feel guilty if they gave their life fighting for her. Well, unless they were monsters like that warlock Nero. Feeling rather shocked at the ruthlessness of that idea, Ami nevertheless kept the option open, if reluctantly. He had never thought he'd actually think about youma fondly. At least, those never killed anyone in gruesome ways (if not for a lack of trying), and their energy drain would be really handy in this situation. With another sigh, Ami stood up and approached the stacks of books. Maybe one of those would hold useful answers.

"I see Mercury has been busy," Cathy said as she walked down one of the corridors, hair still frazzled from the night.

Jered nodded. Same as the swordswoman, he was clad in a red toga made from a curtain, and carefully manoeuvred through the mass of imps milling about without a plan or purpose "She seems certainly energetic. Somewhat surprising after last night."

The blonde blushed red like a tomato. "Let's not bring that up ever again. I mean, she and..? Brr. It doesn't bear thinking about!"

"Exactly! Exactly." Snyder was quick to agree. Somehow, his bowl cut was perfect, not one hair out of place, as Cathy noted with chagrin. There must have been some magic involved. "Where is she, anyway?"

"Let's just ask the imps," Jered suggested, grabbing one of the passing creatures by the shoulder. "Hey you, where's the Keeper?"

The bug-eyed imp looked up with something like surprise in its big black orbs, then pointed one of the three fingers of its right hand at the intersection leading to the briefing room, before it scuttled off to do who-knows-what.

The three adventurers arrived at their destination, only to hesitate at the doorstep. In their defence, the room contained a horned reaper, whose red-scaled form was still looming high, even seated and

stooped over an open tome. He looked up and turned toward the humans, who were retreating nervously from the opening, and waved his free hand invitingly "Oh, good morning. Do come in!"

"Is- is he smiling?" Snyder whispered incredulously.

Jered grinned "Maybe all he needed to mellow out was a night of- OW! Cathy!"

The blonde rubbed her elbow. The brown-haired man's ribcage was somewhat bony. Ignoring his frown, she breathed a sigh of relief that the Reaper had apparently not overheard the comment, and asked "Um, is Mercury around?"

"I'm right here - just switched bodies with the Reaper so she could take a nap for me." *Which certainly sounded better than "I just botched a possession spell, but don't worry, the situation is under control."*

"Switched... bodies? Seriously?" Snyder took a look at the Reaper's scythe, which was, contrary to all expectations, leaning against one of the walls, out of reach of the demon. This gave at least some credibility to the idea.

"So you are Mercury in the horned reaper's body, and he is in yours? Are you sure that's a good idea?" Cathy asked, a hint of worry swinging in her voice.

"Well, it took some convincing" for some reason, Jered waggled his eyebrows silently when he heard that statement, "but she's bound to cause less problems in that form, at least I hope so. Actually, I think she might be able to assist with training like that, as she won't be killing anyone accidentally."

"It's not 'accidental' deaths I'm worried about with a reaper," Cathy muttered. Still, Ami could see that the woman was mulling the idea over. "Well, we might as well give it a try, provided that we use training weapons."

"That won't be hard, as I have noticed a certain lack of equipment - well - everywhere," Jered said. "Even the goblins seem mostly

unarmed. How comes?"

Ami raised a hand behind his head in an embarrassed gesture that didn't fit the hulking demon body he was wearing at all. "Ah, well, that would be because most of what they were holding was replaced by what my clothes-replacing transformation created." Seeing his companion's long faces, he quickly added "I already have an idea on how to remedy that, don't worry!"

Ami reached out with his Keeper power and, after checking that the Reaper was indeed decent, grabbed her from her room, and transported her before present company. Metal and chains clanked as the blue-haired girl wobbled and waved her arms in order to catch her balance. The adventurers just stared at the young female wearing the rather minimalistic horned reaper outfit, although it had been amended with a strip of red fabric wrapped around the chest. Notably, Snyder and Jered were staring longer than was strictly necessary.

"Keeper! Are you going to finally fix this mess?" the Reaper immediately rounded on the largest figure in the room, teeth grinding audibly in the sudden silence.

"No. I called you here because I have a task for you. We have a distinct lack of weapons, so could you make a few more scythes, please?" The polite request just didn't sound right coming from a huge red hell-spawned abomination. The Reaper's cheeks immediately reddened with anger as she heard that.

"What? Arm your unworthy minions with my scythes?"

"Not exactly. Cathy, do you still have that hammer?" Ami turned her attention to the blonde, who nodded in confirmation, but looked puzzled. "Good. If we fold the scythe blades upwards so they point in the same direction as the haft, then we can use them as reasonable spears."

"Spears? SPEARS? Argh!" the Reaper's chest was heaving as she breathed in and out deeply in an effort to calm down, and one of her delicate eyebrows was twitching. Ami was getting worried about the body suffering a stroke.

"That makes sense," Cathy pondered, blue eyes twinkling in amusement, "takes much less time to train someone to use a spear properly than anything else. Besides, it's a much more practical weapon than a scythe."

"Oh, that does it! DIE!" The Reaper's barely-existing patience was finally overcome by the anger at this slander of her signature weapon. With a cry of fury, she hurled herself in the blonde's direction, scythe held high - only to be stopped short as she felt an invisible grip restrain her.

"Now, Reaper, remember our previous discussion," Ami chided. "You want this body back, right?"

The demon in a girl's body kept struggling for a while until it sank in just how little her efforts were helping. Besides, her muscles started to ache after that little bit of exertion. Oh, how she hated being stuck like this! "All right," she growled finally. She threw her weapon down with a loud clang. A flash of red and a wave of heat later, she was holding a new one, which clattered on the floor next to the first one.

"Snyder, were you having any success hiding the emanations of the dungeon heart from the surface?" Ami asked, distracting the redhead from watching the blue haired girl bounce around conjuring more weapons.

"Ah, I'm sorry to inform you that my efforts haven't met with success yet," the acolyte said with a nervous smile, "in fact, the energy output of the heart leads to rapid degradation of my wards, and total failure quickly follows."

"In other words, they burst into flame," Cathy mocked. "How utterly unexpected."

"Don't worry about it," Ami interrupted. "Could you go to the library instead and use the crystal ball to call a certain Nicodemus Asbraxe and buy all the maps you can get? I don't mind if there is some overlap. Once you are done with that, experiment with different materials, please. Maybe it's enough to just chisel a larger ward into stone. "

"Oh, certainly. Why, with my considerable expertise, I will be able to obtain them at a good price too, I'm sure," the young man smiled, already moving toward the exit.

Ami watched the last corner of his white robes disappear around the corner, and addressed Jered, who was still watching the Reaper, much to his more conservatively dressed girlfriend's annoyance. "Jered, can you go around and make a list of things that we are lacking and can't improvise or magic up ourselves? Oh, and don't go into the Heart Chamber. The traps are indiscriminate."

"Okay," the wavy haired man nodded.

Cathy faced Ami's red bulk expectantly, wondering what her task would be.

"Ah, yes, that's quite enough scythes, Reaper. Thanks. Cathy, can you please take those to the goblins and start converting them? Imps, give her a hand." Ami paused at the blonde's nod and watched as a bunch of imps filed in, each one picking up a weapon and then lining up behind the woman like ducklings behind the mother duck. "Once you are done, I would be grateful if you started training them. The beetles too, if possible. Dull practice weapons only to start with."

That left the horned reaper. Ami contemplated letting her train with the others, but one look at the angry furrows marring her brow killed and buried that idea. "You, come with me and stay out of trouble. I may just have a task for you."

Hours later, clouds of grey dust wafted through the room, coating the precariously swaying stacks of open books on the rickety table with a layer of stone particles. Sharp-edged stone chips went flying as a heavy hammer struck again and again, propelled by a slender figure whose blue eyes gleamed with manic glee.

"I think that's enough, Reaper. It stopped moving a while ago." Ami was towering in front of the table, scaled hands leaning on the wood as he looked down at the scribbled notes, frowning. Behind him, a

group of imps dragged and shoved a fresh stone cube about twice as tall as themselves into room, accompanied by horrible scraping noises. "I said THAT'S ENOUGH!" He had to shout to make himself heard over the din.

"Aww." The Reaper's pout on Ami's face might have looked cute if the owner hadn't been plastered in dust that stuck to her sweat-soaked skin, it's paleness only interrupted by streaks of crimson where flying stone splinters had drawn blood. The body was panting with exertion, though the demon inside sounded happy, and the lack of red light in the eyes indicated an unusual absence of anger. "Make a new one! Hurry!" She bounced up and down with excitement, waving the sledgehammer about as if it were her trusty scythe. Under her metal-clad feet, the remains of what seemed to be a half formed statue were ground deeper into the dust.

"Experiment number eighty-six: failure due to fused legs," Ami noted down, looking at the data on her palmtop's screen once again to determine what she was doing wrong. Taking the spirit animating the conjured flesh of an imp and fusing it with stone had seemed like such a promising idea at the start. Use a spell, get an obedient and durable rock soldier out of the deal. It hadn't turned out to be quite that simple. The only one who was enjoying the experiments so far was the Reaper, who had enthusiastically taken up the job of disposing of the failures. The remains of previous attempts were stacked along the walls, big blocks of multi-coloured rock with distorted faces, grasping malformed hands that reached out of the flat sides, and even more disturbing tangles of limbs and other features. For some reason, the imps had thought it a good idea to enhance the mad-scientist lab atmosphere by using the horrid sculptures as holders for suitably dribbly candles. At this point, Ami wouldn't be surprised if one of the bug-eyed servants suddenly turned out to speak with a lisp and started calling him "Mashter."

"Experiment number eighty seven: base material basalt, twenty-six percent increase in mana density over previous experiment." The towering horned form turned toward the innocent stone block and extended its hands, forming a sphere of green-streaked darkness between them. It shot forward and hit the rock, whose already dark stone surface blackened even more and flowed like mud as it grew

taller and slimmer. Lumpy features became more defined, until finally a tall, three-fingered, roughly humanoid figure stood in front of Ami. Very roughly humanoid. It had two eyes and a mouth, but all the proportions were off and asymmetric. However, nothing was missing or too much, and there seemed to be at least some awareness behind these black basalt orbs. Success at last? Ami held up a hand, causing the Reaper to put her raised hammer down in disappointment. "Wait, this one might actually work."

"It is incredibly ugly and should be put out of its misery," the demon in a female body commented. The golem's head turned around to face her with a grinding noise.

"I need them to be able to fight, not to be beautiful. Golem, throw a punch!" Ami ordered, walking in a circle around his creation as he inspected it from all sides.

The golem obliged. Its fist struck the wall with considerable force, then clattered to the ground, most of the arm still attached.

"Can I get rid of Arms-Fall-Off-Boy now?" the Reaper asked eagerly.

Ami sighed and nodded, and immediately, the sounds of violent demolition recommenced. The enthusiasm with which the Reaper took to killing was rather disturbing. Ami hoped with all his heart that those little moans and gasps he heard over the clanging impacts and crumbling noises were only signs of strain and effort. Better to just focus on learning more from the most recent failure. Hmm, the main difference between this experiment and the last, other than stone texture, had been the amount of energy spent on -

A soft thumping sound, very different from the loud strikes of metal against rock, along with the cessation of all other noise, alerted him that something was wrong. He turned around and saw his motionless original body lying on the debris of the latest failed creation, the hammer that had slipped from her fingers forgotten on the ground next to it. In a near panic, Ami ran the few steps over there and knelt down next to the Reaper and picked her up. Still breathing, good. He quickly diagnosed that she had passed out from exhaustion. He probably should have expected something like this. The Reaper simply wasn't used to a body that could get tired, and

had ignored all the warning signs. Ami winced. That wouldn't feel good once he returned to that form. Maybe the Reaper could keep it a while longer. Yes, that sounded sensible.

There was an upside to this sudden collapse, though. With the Reaper unconscious, this was too good an opportunity for finding out what was wrong with the senshi transformation to pass up. Ami dropped off the Reaper in her bedroom and removed what little she was wearing before tucking her under the covers, then disappeared into thin air and re-appeared next to Cathy, who let out a startled shriek as the towering monstrous form suddenly appeared next to her.

"Shit! Don't do that!" the blonde narrowed her eyes at Ami, making the scar running down her right cheek twitch, and waved a long wooden stick at him. Behind her the two rows of ten goblins each collapsed into complete chaos.

"You bunch of wretches! Who said you could relax? Back in line! Maka, I saw that!" Cathy shouted, whirling back to face the little green rapscallions, most of which were still wearing short blue miniskirts and formerly white leotards.

There was much grumbling and stumbling around and crashing into each other, but slowly the mess sorted itself back out into two rows of triangular-eared humanoids holding long wooden sticks straight up, for generous definitions of "up". "Yes, Sir!" answered a high-pitched chorus.

"That's better," the swordswoman commented.

Ami noted that the blonde's toga was torn in places. "Did they give you any trouble?"

"Only at the beginning. It seems that getting something into their dense little skulls takes a certain amount of force," the woman replied, grinning.

A closer look revealed that many of the goblins were sporting bruises and welts, especially on their heads. "Right. I will be doing some experiments in a few minutes that may well cause everyone to

end up in a uniform like the goblins."

"NO WAY!"

Cathy tried to argue, but Ami just continued talking over her protests. It helped that he was in a body with much larger and more powerful lungs than the blonde. "I am sorry about the inconvenience, but everyone of you had better find some privacy and remove everything they intend to keep from their person. I will be starting in a little while, and will send the imps to alert you when everything is over." Without a further word, he disappeared to give the same warning to Snyder and Jered, who both protested even more vehemently than Cathy, but to no avail.

After making sure through Keeper sight that everybody had acted on his advice, Ami teleported himself to the Dungeon Heart and deposited his Mercury computer nearby, open and in scanning mode. Now came the more embarrassing part. He might be in the Reaper's body, but he had no idea how he summoned his gear, so he would have to remove it first. All of it. Sure, there was a good chance that simply de-transforming would get it back, but why take an unnecessary risk? This was one of the situations where being a teenage girl stuck in a male body felt like a rather large problem. Ah well, nobody had ever died from embarrassment, and he wanted to be a doctor later, so he had best get it over with quickly. At least on this body, nobody would ever be able to spot a blush.

Preparations complete, Ami called out "Mercury Power, Make Up!" and felt the familiar transformation, which ended with him, still male, in a short pleated miniskirt and a white leotard with large ribbons, which looked even more ridiculous than it sounded. A quick grab at his ear confirmed that, yes, his scanner now worked even in this body. Staring directly at the Dungeon Heart, he transformed again, and another three times for repeated measures of the data he was recording. Satisfied, he popped over to the Reaper's bedroom and removed the senshi uniform from the unconscious girl and stashed it away in the wardrobe. He would want to have it available once he took his body back. And now it was time to get out of this familiar but embarrassing outfit and back into the horned Reaper garb. When finished, he sent some of the imps, now also fukued, to alert the other dungeon denizens that the "danger" was over.

With an angry grunt, Ami kicked her newest failed creation. The unfortunate statue was catapulted out of the door and impacted the wall, where it shattered into thousands of pieces. This stone golem business wasn't working out as planned. The statues were becoming more lifelike, but he still had not been able to fix any of the brittleness issues. Besides, he was getting the suspicion that the bound spirits would not be able to exert any more force than a regular imp.

"Heard that noise? I think Mercury is over there," Snyder's voice approached from outside. Soon after, he and Jered appeared in the opening of the door and stared into the lab. The weasel-faced man was looking quite tall next to the red-haired acolyte and was holding a strip of paper.

"Mercury? Are you here?"

Both men suddenly went very pale and backed away into the wall, shaking. Ami looked into their wide eyes and said "I know the room looks a bit bad, but *that* seems like an overrea-"

"Who the hell are you?" Jered shouted, his hand disappearing into his toga and rummaging for a knife, while Snyder sank to his knees muttering "...second one... she has two of them... " under his breath.

Ami seemed puzzled for a moment before understanding dawned. *The disguise field is working in this body?* He had felt more like Sailor Mercury, but different, too. Now that he thought about it, his initial body hadn't de-transform, did it? He'd have to remember de-transforming before leaving this one. The regular Reaper was bad enough, a magically boosted one... "I am Sailor Mercury, " he flat out told the two men, which was enough to break the spell, "it was a side effect of what I did earlier, sorry. Don't worry about it."

There were two surprised gasps from the adventurers, before they shook their heads as if to clear away the cobwebs.

"Ah, I see." Jered peered into the lab, taking in dust, debris, and broken statues everywhere. "Not having much success with

whatever it is you are doing?"

"No," Ami admitted, "Or rather, it's a partial success. I can make animated statues, but they consume so much energy when moving that I can only maintain one or two, and that at low activity level or they fall apart."

The red-headed acolyte, who had picked himself up from the floor, coughed to clear the dust from his throat. "Oh, that's normal. Golems always are energy hogs. I had the opportunity to see the one in the kingdom of Neverdark. It runs on a mana battery that needs to recharge for two months for every hour of action," the acolyte proudly offered his knowledge on the matter.

"Would you happen to know why this is so?" Ami asked. She didn't *have* two months to charge some batteries!

"Not exactly. This is advanced magical theory. Still, it has something to do with the material being hard and inflexible, so every movement involves either expending magic to make the solids temporarily soft, or banishing what's in the way and conjuring new material where it needs to be replaced. Usually, the latter method is chosen, as it isn't much more expensive than the former and also makes the golem nearly invulnerable. In any case," the redhead coughed again, "it is like constantly casting a very high level spell. Extremely draining."

"I see. So the solidity is the problem." Ami's statement was not a question, and a far-away, thoughtful look flickered over the horned reaper's features, which certainly had not been made for it. Picture of icy tubes filled with liquid flitted through Ami's mind. Hmm, yes. Fragility would be a problem and strength would remain one... unless... maybe hydraulics... hmm, that would be slow but...

"Hello? Mercury?" Jered was waving his piece of paper in front of the red demon face, a feat he wouldn't even have dreamed about even a day before.

"Oh, sorry, yes. This is the list of things we need and lack?" Ami took it and skimmed over it. It was uncomfortably long. "Well, my imps are digging in a direction that the Reaper informed me would lead to a 'portal', which she expects to give us access to some

Underworld cities. Maybe we can go shopping there."

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Into the Portal

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The long, serpentine tunnel leading toward the portal was growing only slowly. The imps driving it forward had trouble piercing the more solid rock with their picks, and the problem was only getting worse the farther they penetrated into deeper layers. Reaching the Underworld gate took long enough for the Reaper, still in Ami's body, to wake up and promptly get herself into trouble again.

Jered and Cathy stood to the left and right of the blue-haired girl, each having slung an arm under one of her shoulders. Brief periods of struggles to get loose interrupted longer intervals of dangling limply from their grip, head hanging. The spikes on the girl's huge metal pauldrons added an element of risk to the task of supporting her. Ami received the trio at the door to his lab, towering in the door frame as only a huge, barrel-chested horned demon could. He frowned at the three figures, the two taller of which were wearing red togas. A blue choker with a star decoration informed Ami that the blonde was wearing a sailor fuku under the red curtain cloth, but he dismissed that information as unimportant and instead focused on the unhealthy green colour of the Reaper's face. Arms akimbo, he asked. "What did she do now?"

As if in response, the sick-looking girl coughed, and three small yellow feathers flew from her mouth, one of which stuck to the left side of her chin.

"Oh no, she didn't. Please tell me she didn't." Ami's red hand balled into a fist and covered his fanged mouth as he hoped against hope that his suspicions wouldn't be confirmed.

"Sure did. Walked up to the chicken farm, grabbed a chick, and took a large bite out of it when it wouldn't fit whole." Cathy sounded rather amused as she quickly summarised the situation. Her brown-haired companion looked merely disgusted.

"There's - cough - something wrong with your chickens, Keeper," the

Reaper complained through gagging noises, "that one tasted terrible!"

"I don't eat raw meat! Humans don't! No wonder you are feeling sick. I'm feeling queasy even thinking about what you just did with my body!" The others had the rare opportunity to watch a horned reaper pale, at least until Ami hid his face in his palms. "Just... eww. I hope the healing spell works on this!" To his relief, the necromancy, while not tailored to pumping out a stomach, was able to work its magic on the pieces of dead chicken, and the disgusting meat was removed from his poor, mistreated original body. He was getting serious doubts about letting the Reaper continue to inhabit it, despite the advantage of he himself being huge and tireless for it. Unbidden, even more embarrassing failures related to the misuse of bodily functions came to his mind.

Gritting his teeth at the mental pictures, Ami activated his scanner to see if he hadn't missed anything that was wrong with the girl sitting on the cold floor, and let out a small gasp when the screen came up with warning lights. While an imp cleaned up the grisly remains of the Reaper's meal, chittering disapprovingly, Ami rapidly tapped tapped the keys of his computer, trying to make sense of the readings. Even as he watched, the counter associated with the contamination alert sluggishly crept upwards, approaching the three percent mark. He didn't know yet what exactly this implied, but one thing was clear: it was all the Reaper's fault. The Mercury computer snapped shut, and the visor over the demonic figure's yellow eyes disappeared into a haze of sparkles as he dropped the senshi transformation. "That does it. I want my body back before you mess it up even more!" Ami said in a strained tone of voice.

A flash of blackness connected the bulky red form of the horned reaper to the diminutive one of the under-dressed girl on the ground, and the demon disappeared into a swirl of darkness that was sucked into the smaller body. *"Finally! Free of this humiliating body!* Ami could feel the searing heat of the Reaper's triumphant thoughts as their minds touched briefly.

My body is perfectly fine! Now GET OUT! With a metaphorical kick in the arse, Ami evicted the demon from her poor, aching body. An ink-like blot of black shot out of her forehead and into the corridor,

past a surprised Cathy and Jered. It bounced off the wall as it resolved itself into the form of the Reaper, and the tall demon landed flat on the floor tiles with an earth-shaking crash.

"Ow!" Ami groaned, standing up with slow and cautious movements, nearly yelped in pain at the soreness in her muscles. "Didn't it ever cross your mind that when your limbs start hurting, you should stop doing what you are doing?"

"And stop killing? Are you insane?" the Reaper snapped back, fangs bared and murder in his eyes as he prepared to vent about his recent imprisonment in such an unworthy, weak mortal body.

"If you cause any more trouble, I'll put you into a chicken next time!" Ami threatened. *Once I figure out how.*

The Reaper's already opening mouth shut with an audible click. After a moment, he growled "Whatever." and stalked off, down the corridor, kicking an imp who was too slow to get out of his way. She could nearly feel the fury radiating off him.

Ami gagged as the taste in her mouth struck fully home. It was as if something had died in there, she thought, before remembering that that had, in fact, happened. "Blargh."

"You are looking mighty green there," Cathy said, grabbing Ami's arm near the shoulder to steady her swaying form.

"Thank you," the young Keeper answered. Ow! Every movement hurt. She wasn't that out of shape, was she? Just how much exercise had her body gotten when the Reaper possessed it? Slowly and on tired, wobbly legs, she walked back into her lab. Snyder looked up from where he was crouching in the light of dribbling candles held by strange, distorted stone limbs protruding from the rock. His eyes went wide when he saw the girl staggering in.

"Ahem. Mercury? Are you all right? And aren't you cold wearing that?"

Ami looked down at herself. Right. Reaper outfit with added strip of red cloth to cover her chest. She quickly weighted the advantages of

changing into the more modest sailor senshi uniform waiting in her room against the potential pain of going through all the movements required to get into the outfit. "I'm fine," she decided. What she was wearing was less revealing than a bikini, anyway. "Imps! A chair! And a few glasses of water!"

When the furniture arrived, she let herself drop into it with a sigh of relief. "So, Snyder, are you making any progress with that warding scheme?" she inquired with a polite smile.

The redhead cleared his throat and pointed at a series of scorch marks on the floor with his chisel. "I'm afraid that my experiments with re-routing the power drained by my wards into a battery is not working out as planned yet."

"Mainly because you have no idea how to construct a magical battery in the first place, right?" Cathy taunted. The blonde had stepped into the room and leaned against the book-covered table as her blue eyes took in the various unfinished or destroyed creations strewn around the room.

"I'll have you know that I'm making some progress deriving first principles from each attempt," the acolyte defended himself. "See, I'm thinking of applying Dorian's Theory of Gnostic-"

"All right, all right, no need to bore me with arcane details that I won't understand anyway. How's your home-grown monster research coming along, Mercury?" the blonde turned toward Ami with a hopeful expression. "Please say it's going well. Trying to drill discipline into the goblins is like trying to pull teeth from a rabid wolf."

"Ah, well," Ami sat up straighter as she unknowingly went into lecture mode "I have been investigating several methods to reduce the energy consumption of my golems. The first attempt was with using a liquid base instead of a solid one. Water, mud of various consistencies and compositions, tar, even some molten rock obtained from one of Snyder's more spectacular failures. However, none of them were able to keep a shape and just flattened into puddles and rippled sadly until the spell dispersed. You are standing in one of the more successful attempts, I believe."

Cathy looked at her feet. The puddle underneath her soles was trying, unsuccessfully, to climb up her boots. She stomped once in surprise, dispersing the water. It ceased moving.

"And that," Ami sighed, "is the second problem with using liquid bodies. They lose cohesion too quickly. Which brings us to my next sequence of experiments. Liquid bodies within an elastic hull." She took a sheet of notes from her desk. "Subject one-hundred and thirty two, burst. Subject one-hundred and thirty three, unable to move under its own weight. Subject one-hundred and thirty four, looted by goblins as novelty pillow. I think I need not go on."

"So *that's* where they got that thing from," Cathy muttered to herself. "No useful results yet?"

"I can run a tiny solid golem to drain off excess energy from the dungeon heart by now," Ami answered, "that's a small success. I'm also investigating a number of other promising leads. For example, a golem with mechanical joints could get around the whole deformation issue. However, progress is slow, as I don't have a spell that can create or assemble all required parts by itself yet, so I had to work with a crude prototype arm sculpted by the imps." Ami took a long breath and pointed at a collection of cylinders attached to each other that, in the right light, might pass as a mechanical arm at first glance. It was strapped to a rock block and rattled in an unsettling way.

"I take it something went wrong?"

"Aside from the production difficulties, I found out that the animating spirit will only affect the object it is merged with, none of the other components. While I could just summon more into the individual parts, which I attempted on that prototype, they simply don't work together, and all I get is a loosely connected, uncoordinated, twitching mess. In addition, the power drain of using so many spells on the same warrior, albeit less than with solid golems, is still considerable." Ami took a deep breath. She started to talk faster and faster. "So what I need to do is research a completely new spell to craft the parts, and another one to get the different components to cooperate. Or alternatively, one that animates all parts at once. In addition, I really need to find out out how mana batteries are built,

and I also want to look into hollow solid golems. For the latter, I think I might need that fabrication spell, and fragility might be an issue. On top of that, I need to manage the dungeon and expand its defences. So much to do, and I don't even know what to start with!"

Cathy cocked her head. "Well, I can't help with any of the magic stuff, but to me it sounds that you are trying to do too many things by yourself. What you need is assistants."

Snyder looked up from his task of hammering another rune into a rectangular plate of stone "I am expanding my abilities by leaps and bounds, I assure you, so-"

"Competent assistants," Cathy elaborated.

"Where am I supposed to find assistants? Nobody is going to want to work for a Keeper, especially not one wanted by the Baron!" Ami winced, perhaps at the thought, perhaps at a twinge from one of her many sore muscles.

"On the surface. Keepers never seem to lack for minions from the Underworld. Remember those goblins? They had little hesitation to sign up with you. Anyone from the Underworld is probably going to be an utter bastard, though," the blonde pointed out. "Plan accordingly. You'll just have to come along on the shopping trip and find some hirelings."

The portal reminded Ami of pictures of Stonehenge. Four arches, composed of two tall stone pillars with a horizontal crossbar on top, were arranged in such a way that they touched at the corners. The area inside the square they formed glowed with hazy images of faraway territories and emitted a warm orange light that suffused the spacious cave that the construct was located in, causing the group of comparatively tiny figures assembled in front of it to cast long shadows.

"I don't know. Are you *sure* this is a good idea?" Ami asked, nearly drowning in the heap of pillows she was lounging on. On Jered's behest, the goblins had found a huge chair, sawed off its legs, and

added some cushioning and horizontal bars to its sides. To top things off, Ami had been asked to take a seat on the makeshift palanquin.

The brown-haired man nodded. "Naturally. This way, you won't look infirm, merely decadent."

Ami pushed herself up higher in her seat so she could frown properly at him. The dull ache in her muscles that she felt at the movement reminded her uncomfortably of the fact that he might have a point.

"Don't look at me like that. 'Decadent' is very much the only impression you can make with your army in this state." Jered extended his arm, pointing at the gaggle of fuku-clad goblins who were more or less following Cathy's instructions, makeshift spears that had once been scythes held vertically into the air. The blonde woman barked a command, and the small green humanoids stopped, even though some bumped into each other, and at least one straggler tried to run up and hide within the formation. A wave of wobbling spears marked the progress of its obscured body.

"Oh? Is that why you talked me into dressing up like this?" the swordswoman glared at the weasel-featured man, pulling down the hem of her much-too-short miniskirt as she turned.

"You must admit that it looks better when the entire military is in uniform, and this scratchy curtain cloth is no picnic either," Jered replied, patting his own improvised toga. "Besides, what our dear leader is wearing is even more revealing, and you don't see her complain about it, do you?"

Cathy spared a short glance at the blue-haired girl, who was still in her modified reaper outfit and baring way more skin than the adventuress was comfortable with. The corners of her lips went down slightly. "Well, we already knew that she has no problem with wearing embarrassing things. At least we left Snyder behind."

"Well, if it helps, I think you look adorable," the wavy-haired man tried to defuse his companion's temper, "but I think we should get going, time is wasting."

The Underworld city was not what Ami had expected, not that she had a very precise mental image of what one would look like to begin with. However, there was a notable absence of warped little sheds huddling against each other, of city walls, and of winding little alleys. Instead, the initial impression she got when she was carried through the magical gate on her swaying palanquin, flanked by two rows of spear-holding goblins, was that of crushing heat. A surge of hot air washed over her exposed skin as soon as she had cleared the veil-like distortions of the portal, and she got her first good look at the area beyond. It was an open plaza located in one of the side arms of a wide canyon, whose steep slopes became near vertical at the top, until they disappeared into the smoke-filled darkness above. Presumably, there was a ceiling somewhere beyond the murk, but she couldn't see it from her position. Rather than being dark, the area was well lit by a stream of slow-flowing lava at the bottom of the canyon. Its glow gave a reddish tint to everything, similar to the interior of a forge. It took Ami a moment to realise that the black, leaf-like shapes covering most surfaces near the fiery river were, in fact, plants. *They must have adapted to better absorb the sparse light they get in here*, the studious girl mused.

The new arrivals were not alone on the portal plateau. About an arrow's flight away stood what looked like an unfriendly welcoming committee, about a score of green humanoids with large, knobbly noses, thick eyebrows, and broad mouths. They were considerably taller than Ami's own goblins, held hammers or cudgels, and were wearing loincloths and little else. The pot-bellied things started pointing and jeering when they noticed Ami's skirted troupe. "What are those?" the inexperienced Keeper asked.

"Trolls," Cathy replied, the grip on her own spear tightening. "They are about as strong as humans, but their leathery hide is hard to pierce. They must have been camped out here for a while, look at those empty beer barrels."

"The fat blob over there has to be their leader," Jered added. He was referring to a large, near spherical mass of fatty red folds, covered by a breastplate. It had no legs, but still managed to stand as tall as the trolls that were giving it a wide berth. The creature was

dragging itself toward Ami's group with the aid of its long, nearly comically thin arms. Its companions were following it with a slow, swaggering walk, posturing to look as big and intimidating as possible. Lop-sided grins appeared on the green faces, revealing large molars protruding like tusks from their lower jaws.

"Are they going to fight? They are between us and the entrance to the city," Ami pointed out. The wall of approaching green-skins blocked the way to the ramp leading out of this side-gorge and up to the city proper, which was located within the rocky walls of the main cavern. Lit openings covered the canyon's slopes nearly down to the lava level, some of them big, some of them small. As much as they varied in size, they also varied in the quality of the masonry. Where at some points pillars loomed, framed by straight lines and topped by proud gargoyles, other locations showed a predominance of simple holes hastily hewn into the wall. The more affluent-looking dwellings seemed to cluster around the lower parts of the cave, according to Ami's preliminary analysis. Connecting the labyrinth of entrances, windows, and terrace-like protrusions was a network of stairs and promenades that, with their horizontal and diagonal arrangement, formed a pattern that reminded her of a house of cards.

"They are probably going to see how much we are willing to pay to avoid a fight," Jered said. He felt vulnerable in just this thin toga, which wouldn't offer any protection against a blow by one of the trolls' weapons. The goblins, who were moving closer to each other as the larger green figures formed a large semi-circle around the party, didn't do much to re-assure him. Some were already looking back at the portal with longing.

The meaty cadence of blunt instruments smacking into open palms was well-calculated for maximum intimidation factor, and the biggest trolls occupied the front ranks, looming in a professional, threatening way. The whole procedure had the feel of a well re-hearsed performance, Ami thought.

"You puny weaklings there! You are trespassing on our territory! You must pay us for this transgression, or face the consequences!" the blob-like leader bellowed, and his thugs nodded and made approving grunts.

While Ami was thinking about an appropriate reply, the thing's body odour hit her, having much the same effect as an unexpected slap. She blinked in surprise and startled astonishment, unwilling to believe that she had really just smelled that. The goblins were more vocal in their reaction, making retching noises and holding their noses. The lack of concentration didn't do much for their ability to keep a palanquin steady. The girl on it let out a startled yelp as it swayed right and left, prompting much sniggering from the ranks of the trolls. "I see your point," she held up her hands in a placating gesture. "Why don't you discuss the payment details with him?" Ami pointed with her thumb over her shoulder, at the portal. She flexed her Keeper power. Grab! The Reaper disappeared from his throne. Drop! He landed in front of the portal, a look of angry confusion on his face. Shove! The red demon staggered through the gate.

The watching trolls turned their heads as the portal flared orange, and a blurry silhouette peeled itself out of the glow, approaching with clanging steps. When the Reaper's towering form became fully visible, along with his furious grimace, the grins on their faces disappeared. The red demon stopped, turning his head left and right as he took in his new surroundings, and then *smiled*. He raised his scythe high, leaned back, and let out an ear-shattering roar. Ami could feel the wood under her fingers shake from the intensity of the sound, and suppressed the urge to cover her ears. In the back of her mind, the part that she associated with being a Keeper, something snapped, and when she returned her gaze to the shadowed face of the demon, backlit by the swirling energies of the portal, she realised what. A shiver of dread ran down her spine as she looked into those yellow pupils, flaring like miniature suns.

"FREE! Free at LAST!" The monster took a clanking step forward, his grin widening, and raised his scythe so it glittered in the light. "And now, you useless worm of a Keeper, we shall see how well you fight when you can't teleport around at will! And if you even think of running, I'll gleefully slaughter everyone in this city! You will suffer for all the humiliations you have inflicted on me!"

Last edited: Aug 14, 2016

Reaper Battle! (DARK)

Originally on 2009-10-25T18:24:00

A shudder went through Ami's palanquin when the goblins realised that they were between a furious horned reaper and his target. The beast barrelled down on the group of fuku-clad greenskins, and their ranks broke as they scattered like frightened chickens, each one predictably attempting to save its own hide first. All discipline was dropped by the wayside, along with the Keeper's litter.

Ami felt a moment of weightlessness as the cushioned bottom of the re-purposed chair fell away underneath her. Her seat had been facing away from the portal that the Reaper had stepped through, and she had been in the process of twisting her torso awkwardly to face him when the goblins let her fall. At least the pile of pillows underneath her softened the impact when she struck the ground. The palanquin toppled, dumping her on the warm rock of the floor, where she rolled to a stop on her belly. This gave her a good view of the red blur that was the reaper, a gleaming arc denoting the path of the scythe blade held over his right shoulder as he stormed toward her.

Despite the protest of her aching muscles, she managed to pull herself to one knee, and unleashed her trademark attack, the Shabon Spray Freezing. Rock cracked under the demon's armoured hooves as he launched himself into the air with a mighty bound, clearing the compact pillar of glowing bubbles shooting in his direction, and ascending higher than he was tall. At the apex of his leap, he brought down his scythe, firing a large flaming sphere at the kneeling girl. Ami's eyes went wide as she tracked the monster's progress with her head tilted backward. She let out a gasp as the fireball approached, casting her pale features in bright relief. With a surge of adrenaline, she threw herself to the side, drawing upon reserves she didn't know she had. She felt a tremor go through the ground while she rolled away from the attack's point of impact. It exploded into an expanding ring of fire that washed outward over everyone unfortunate enough to be nearby. The wall of fire blistered

her exposed skin as it washed over her prone body, and brought tears of pain to her eyes. All around, she could hear the shrieks of the goblins become louder when the skirts and ribbons of their outfit caught on fire.

A second impact, a mere second later than the first, alerted the blue haired girl to the fact that the Reaper had landed amidst the destruction he had unleashed. The blazing palanquin crunched under his hooves, spitting burning feathers and black smoke into the air that swirled around the muscular form of the demon like a cloak. The smell of sulphur and worse stung in Ami's nostrils while she once again struggled to pull herself off the floor, whose uneven surface pressed painfully into her bare skin. Only her shins and shoulders were free of scratches by now, owing to the effectiveness of the armour protecting them.

Within the conflagration, the horned demon swung his scythe horizontally, holding it near the end of its haft. He spun around like a top, and the deadly weapon described a graceful horizontal circle as it followed the movement. Under Ami's horror-stricken gaze, it cut through flesh and bone, removed the legs of one goblin who had been too slow, bisected a second at the waist in a shower of blood and entrails, and beheaded a third before continuing on towards *NO! CATHY!*

Sparks flew as metal rang on metal. The blonde grit her teeth and held with both hands onto the haft of the spear interposed between her body and the deadly blade. Despite the desperate parry, the Reaper's scythe continued on its path, lifting the slender swordswoman bodily into the air and hurling her away. She crashed into one of the trolls who was still standing undecided near the battlefield.

"Shabon Spra- ARGH!"

Ami stared in disbelief at the black metal rod protruding from her belly. The pain spreading like a wildfire through her abdomen was nearly unbearable, and a thin trickle of red ran down her chin as she bent over and collapsed to her knees. Her hands unconsciously clenched around the haft of the weapon that had impaled her. Her gaze wandered forward, seeking out the form of the Reaper, whose

right foot was still raised from kicking the dead goblin's spear in her direction. Through the large spots in her fading vision, she could see his eyes flare yellow with glee as he strode towards her, lifting his scythe to finish the job. The monster seemed to loom larger and more terrible with every step, and was savouring every moment of this. No! She couldn't die! It couldn't end like this!

The scythe whistled toward Ami's neck as time seemed to slow down for the girl. She could see every notch of the blade as it shimmered in the firelight, every droplet of blood driven across the metal surface as it parted the air, only to drop off the edge and form a thin, half-moon shaped trail of miniature red comets. Across the bonfire that had once been a palanquin and now also encompassed the bodies of her poor fallen minions, Ami could see the hunch-backed trolls move in on Cathy and Jered, now that the victor was clear. The brown-haired man had a dagger in each hand and was standing protectively in front of the blonde, who looked staggered after being slammed into a troll. *I'm sorry, Cathy.* The dying girl's eyes flared up like glowing embers.

The Reaper's scythe continued on its path, unimpeded. Too unimpeded. Ami's form dissolved into streamers of black lightning that flowed around the blade. The spear protruding through her body fell and clattered to the ground, and for a moment, the uncoiling darkness looked eerily like an angry red-eyed face before disappearing. The demon roared in rage at being denied his revenge, and kept attacking the spot where his victim had just been in a mindless frenzy, sending a spray of rock chips flying in all directions with each blow.

"Cathy? Cathy, can you hear me?"

What's going on? Oh Light I can't move! Help! What's happening to me? Oh no, the trolls are coming! Move body, dammit! Work!" Ami could hear the blonde's thoughts as if from far away, picking up in tempo as they became more and more panicked.

"Cathy! Listen to me!"

My body is moving on its own, oh no, no, no. I should never have enlisted with a Keeper. I should have known this would happe-

"CATHY!"

"M-Mercury? Is that you? Are you doing this?" the swordswoman's thought-voice sounded both frightened and furious, now that she had become aware of the other presence in her head.

Please don't be afraid. I just need to borrow your body for a moment, as I'm too injured to fight.

"Mercury Power, Make up!"

Jered felt his hackles rise. The cry was in Cathy's voice, but the words and pronunciation were *wrong*. Blue light enveloped him momentarily as his clothing was replaced with a white leotard and short miniskirt. Worse than the humiliation was the fact that the transformation had robbed him of his weapons. With rising dread, he looked over his shoulder, only to have his worst suspicions confirmed. While the blonde's senshi uniform had not changed, it looked neater and cleaner, and the woman herself looked as if she had just spent hours applying make-up and combing her hair. In other circumstances, he would have felt attracted by the sight of her posing in the revealing costume, a few blue sparkles still dancing around her. However, the fact that her beautiful blue eyes were glowing with red light made him have an awful feeling in the pit of his stomach. "Mercury! How could you? Leave her alone! GET OUT!" Immediately, he found himself unceremoniously yanked up and dropped down back in the dungeon near the portal. The tunnel's cold, damp air felt like an icy shower after the sweltering heat of the Underworld City. With loud grunts and squeaks of surprise, the surviving goblins landed next to him, forming a disorderly pile of tangled green limbs on the ground. The only one missing was his precious Cathy, he registered with a feeling of helplessness.

"Shabon Spray!"

The Reaper looked up when a bank of fog filled the plaza, lowering the temperature and dampening the light of the fires. The voice who had shouted the incantation was not that of the Keeper, but it was one of her custom spells, so she must be possessing the blonde. The corners of his mouth twitched upwards in anticipation of another chance at killing Mercury, and with nary a thought, he launched a

fireball in the direction the shout had come from. A troll's howl of pain informed him that, while he had missed his target, the attack hadn't been entirely wasted. Orange light penetrated through the murk, shifting more to the left as the burning creature ran around in a blind panic. Firing another sphere of flame and running directly in its wake, he sought to reach the last known location of the blonde. The precaution was proven to be entirely necessary when the ball of fire preceding the demon exploded into steam with a hiss, struck by a gust of freezing magic.

"Thanks, Cathy!"

The blonde suddenly felt Mercury's mental presence leave her, and a moment later was face to face with Jered, who smiled in relief when she appeared out of thin air. She felt energised - the effect of whatever Mercury had been doing obviously hadn't left her yet. Speaking of which, everyone in the room flashed blue when the Keeper undoubtedly used her strange transformation magic again.

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me," the Reaper snorted, furrows between his huge eyebrows deepening as he looked across the bonfire at his opponent. Around the crackling fire, updrafts caused by the ascending hot hair made the fog spiral toward the faraway cavern ceiling, providing an oasis of relative clarity in the greyish soup. This made it possible for the demon to have a good look at his latest challenger, who stood in a combat stance, hands balled into fists and raised protectively. The fukued imp's red eyes were glowing like fist-sized rubies.

"Shabon Spray Freezing," the little creature squeaked in reply, then scrambled as the demon side-stepped the fast-moving frost attack and lunged towards his attacker. As his scythe cleaved through the space the thing had occupied just a moment before, the imp simply disappeared, only to drop down a short distance away, along with two companions. The trio blinked dumbly at him (not that they ever looked intelligent) before scattering, each bug-eyed creature running into another direction to hide in the fog.

"Just another silly trick, Mercury. I'll still get you in the end. Have you considered just how fragile these creatures are?" the Reaper started zigzagging as he fired off fireballs at random, aimed at the ground

rather than any elusive target. He heard a squeaked transformation phrase from somewhere in the drifting fog clouds, and launched more fire in that direction before he had to evade another blast blast of frigid bubbles. The area was becoming brighter and brighter with every fireball he unleashed. Each one increased the area of the floor that was burning, decreasing the safe space upon which his opponent could tread. As a nice side benefit, the rising heat made the wind pick up, slowly but surely getting rid of the damnable murk. And if some of the troll thugs got caught in the burning field, all the better.

The Reaper's mood improved when he heard the shrill squeal of an imp that had touched the flames and was dissolving into green motes. Through the fading fog, he could now see the little forms of the creatures scuttling around like rats between the walls of fire, keeping to the fewer and fewer cool spots. Unfortunately, it seemed that Mercury had gotten wise to his tactics, and she was doing her best to freeze the floor and to put out the flames. Good for him that this was easy to interrupt, either by launching himself at the imp in question, or by simply sending more fire its way. The one thing that was immensely irritating was the fact that he could barely predict which of the pesky minions was going to launch a blast next, as the Keeper was hopping bodies faster than he could keep up with. Black lightning arced between the five imps surrounding him in a wide circle as her presence darted from one to the next. And always, always she kept shifting them further away from him whenever he got close. Still, she was slowly running out of room, and then he would have her cornered. His eventual victory was inevitable. And even if she chose to run, she was so injured that he could risk following her into her dungeon. Life was great.

"Shabon Spray Freezing!"

It was really convenient how she had to shout out the attack phrase, alerting him to the incoming danger. Strange echo this time, though, thought the Reaper. He launched a fireball into the path of the magical ray of frost, grinning as both projectiles collided and neutralised each other.

Ami saw stars dance in front of her eyes. What in her planet's name was that? Her attack shouldn't drain her like that! Behind the hulking

form of her enemy, she saw something speed forward through the flames. The already large eyes of her imp-body widened to immense size as she traced the blast's trajectory back to the blonde figure standing in front of the portal, both palms still facing toward the Reaper's back. Her? How?

Feeling some incoming danger, the demon spun around, catching the second Shabon Spray Freezing on his scythe arm instead of his back. Immediately, the limb and weapon disappeared under a thick, heavy layer of ice, immobilising half of his body. From the corner of his eye, he saw the Cathy girl approach, jumping over the patches of fire - since when could she leap like that? She ducked out of his line of sight, behind one of the firewalls, then re-appeared, holding a blood-covered metal spear. How? Was the Keeper possessing her again? No, the imp still had blazing eyes and - curses! A fresh wave of frost struck his feet. It was surprisingly weak, as these attacks went, but still enough to glue his hooves to the floor, putting him into a rather precarious situation. Furiously, he hammered at the ice coating his scythe arm with his free hand, spreading deep cracks with each ringing blow.

His efforts were interrupted when the blonde arrived, jabbing her weapon at his unprotected back. He had to nearly dislocate his shoulder in order to slap the incoming strike aside, and the weapon, fashioned from one of his own scythes, still managed to slice a deep furrow into his biceps. Enraged, the fingers of his free hand closed around the haft of the weapon and held on to it, despite Cathy's struggles. He jerked the weapon up, throwing her off her feet and whipping her body upward. She let go and flew in a graceful arc, but had to rapidly fire a Shabon Spray Freezing at her landing point to avoid being burned. Once again, Ami felt as if something was sucking the strength out of her.

The demon, hurt and angry, was still sufficiently aware of the situation to know when the tide had turned against him. One ice-wielding body-hopping harlot? Manageable. Two? No. The looted scythe was sized for a weak mortal body and mangled beyond recognition, but still sufficient to channel a fireball through. With a bellow of rage, he unleashed his flame directly at his feet, surrounding himself with a curtain of scalding steam and forcing the

blonde to retreat further. Free, he hurled the weapon like a javelin to skewer the annoying complication, sure that she was less replaceable than a random imp. The human had the gall to catch the weapon as she ducked out of its flight path and to smirk at him! He'd have to do something suitably horrible to her, but later. The Reaper broke into a run, leaning low as he moved at his top speed, diving into the obscuring curtain of steam that his bid for freedom had unleashed.

"He's fleeing! Where did he go?"

"That way! He's running toward the lava river!" an imp was not meant to wear a visor over its bulbous eyes, and what the magic had come up with to accommodate its strange anatomy made it look as if it was wearing a transparent blue helmet.

"Got it! Shabon Spray Freezing! What the hell?" the ersatz-Sailor Mercury shouted as the demon evaded her attack by launching himself off the cliff, spreading his arms as he fell toward the stream of liquefied stone below. "Suicide?"

The demon struck the lava with a wet plop, sending a small wave through the viscous liquid. Not bothered by the heat, he raised his fist and shook it at the miniskirted blonde watching from the cliffs above, before sinking under the bubbling surface. A red-eyed imp joined Cathy on the cliff, a second brightly-lit contour before the black background of the ceiling. "Dang," Ami squeaked, "we aren't going to be able to catch him in there."

"Cheer up, we just kicked a horned reaper's arse! That has to count for something!" Cathy stepped away from the gorge, no longer able to bear the searing wind howling out of its magma-filled depths. Sobering, she added. "Though don't. Ever. Take over my body again without asking!"

"Sorry! I was dying and not really thinking straight at the time!" the imp gave an apologetic little bow, which looked rather comical.

"Oh, I saw that," Cathy replied, "thought you were done for. Will you ever be able to take your proper shape again?"

Ami considered this for a while, then nodded. "It's just a wound, deep but not complicated. Without that spear through it, I should be able to heal it if I just prepare the spell beforehand. Let me give it a try."

A sphere of darkness shot out of the imp's forehead, hovering for an eye-blink before it grew into the shape of Ami's body. Aside from black and red, colour was the last thing to reappear. The girl, still dressed in the Reaper costume, had appeared in a crouching position, one palm pressed to her stomach, the other to the hole in her back. The pale green light of applied necromancy played over her sweaty and blood-encrusted skin before she slowly rose to a stand. Her blue strands hung down dishevelled and hid her soot-covered face, but her eyes blazed as bright as the lava below.

The few remaining members of the band of thugs who had stuck around took one look at the half-naked girl and her tall but slender companion, armed only with a spear. Both of them, and this was the important part, had just driven off a fucking *horned reaper*. The trolls decided to find some less dangerous prey. Like an ancient vampire or a dragon, maybe.

Last edited: Sep 9, 2016

City Expedition, Second Attempt

Originally on 2009-10-27T23:49:00

Ami was breathing hard and feeling weak in her knees. Blood loss, she realised with a look down at her belly. Smears of dark red coated her skin there, forming a stark contrast with the brighter tones where sweat glistened in the orange light. The consequences of the hastily-healed injury were combining with Ami's previous sickness and aching muscles to make even standing a chore, now that she had time to dwell on the state of her body. Below the cliffs located a few steps behind the blue-haired girl, the lava river roared. The sweltering heat rising from the stream contributed to Ami's exhaustion, and she was suddenly grateful that she wasn't wearing anything warmer than the loincloth and red strip of cloth covering her chest that came with the Reaper's outfit. The metal armour covering her shoulders, shins, and hips was feeling uncomfortably hot and heavy, though. Her thoughts drifted for a moment to how little coverage such a design really provided, before turning to more unpleasant matters.

The plaza between her and the portal was still on fire, although the flames were in the process of dying down. Surrounding the charred remains of the palanquin lay three or four little bodies. The precise number was hard to tell because the half-cooked remains were in multiple dismembered parts. At their sight, Ami felt another sinking sensation in her stomach that had nothing to do with physical illness. The knowledge that the goblins had died in her service made her deeply uncomfortable, even if she intellectually knew that the blame lay entirely with the Reaper. She looked up at Cathy standing next to her. She was observing both the lava flow and the ramp leading to the city through narrowed eyes. Dark shapes, not all of them humanoid, had appeared before the bright doors and windows, apparently observing the battle. Gradually, they slipped back into the hollows hewn into the cavern walls when it became clear that the excitement was over.

"Cathy," Ami asked with a thin voice, "are there some customs that

should be observed about that?" she indicated the chopped-up corpses strewn over the ground with a nerveless wave of her hand.

The blonde shrugged. "I haven't grown up in the Underworld."

Ami nodded in understanding. "I don't think I can continue on in this state. I'll move us back to the dungeon."

The air distorted faintly as it rushed into the vacuum where both girls had been standing before. Ami and Cathy re-appeared inside her dungeon, in front of the other denizens.

"Cathy! You are safe!" Jered exclaimed, voice filled with relief, and walked toward the blonde, "what were you thinking, going out there to fight that beast?"

"Mainly that the Reaper knows where this dungeon is and how to get back here," she answered, in a deadpan tone of voice, before snickering at the brown-haired man's flabbergasted expression. That thought had obviously not occurred to him yet. He turned nervously toward the four megaliths forming the portal. "He's not going to walk in at any moment now, is he?"

"No, we sent him running like a dog with his tail between his legs," the blonde stated with satisfaction, smacking her fist into her open palm. The surviving goblins leaning against the unfinished wall of the corridor let out a cautious cheer.

"You won?" Jered asked, incredulous. "And stop sniggering!"

"Sorry. You look so ridiculous in that skirt!" Cathy continued giggling at the sight of the man in a sailor fuku. "And we sure did kick arse! I tagged him with an ice blast and then sliced open his arm!" the swordswoman gushed, grabbing her blood-soaked spear and waving it about in her enthusiasm to display it.

"Wait, what? *You* used magic? How does that work?"

"I'm very interested in learning how you managed to do that, too," Ami chimed in. She was sitting on the floor, a pillow between her and the cold ground, and imps were scurrying around her. Two were busy draping a blanket from her bedroom around her shoulders,

protecting the shivering girl from the chilly dungeon air.

"Well, you showed me how," Cathy explained. "I was right there when you used the spell, and could feel how you shaped it and how you were drawing power into it," the woman explained. "It took me a while to realise that I was still connected to the power source even after you left, and so..." She trailed off when she noticed that Ami had activated her visor and was now peering intently at her.

The blue-haired girl's fingers flew over the keyboard of her computer, and she asked "Could you demonstrate, please?"

Cathy complied, coating one of the walls with a thin layer of ice. Ami felt light-headed from the sudden drain, and slumped down on her pillow. Shaking her head, she straightened with a faint groan, and looked on the readout on her screen. "Could you do the regular Shabon Spray too, please?"

"Are you sure that's wise? You don't look so good," the fuku-wearing blonde cautioned. Seeing Ami's determined nod, she went ahead, and bubbles spread through the tunnel, filling it with white fog.

"That's strange, I barely felt that," Ami commented, comparing the readings she had taken of this attack with the ones from before. "There appears to be-"

"Wait. You are linked to the dungeon heart too now?" Jered asked with dawning horror as he looked from his girlfriend to Mercury.

"No, I don't think so," Ami replied, "From what I am seeing here, she is tapping directly into the magic I had before linking with the dungeon heart. I think the connection was forged when I transformed using her body, and that it will disappear once she de-transforms."

"I'd rather not, if it's all the same to you," Cathy objected. "These enchantments make me stronger and faster, and it doesn't look as if it's consuming too much of your energy to maintain them."

"Well, uh," Ami scratched her head, not having expected that, "but it's quite likely that nobody who hasn't seen you transform will

recognise you, unless you directly tell them who you are."

The blonde thought about this for a moment."I'm shocked and appalled at the idea that nobody will be able to connect the girl wearing this ridiculous outfit with me," she finally said, "I really am."

Ami suddenly turned to the goblins, feeling guilty about being too distracted by her own curiosity to think about them. "I'm sorry about your dead comrades - is there something that needs to be done about them?"

"Is safe to go out now?" the largest goblin, who was still a good head shorter than Ami, asked while pointing at the wavering images within the portal. At the Keeper's confirming nod, he shouted "You heard! Go loot bodies before someone else do!"

The disorderly mob of green creatures elbowed and jostled each other in their haste to get through the portal first. The other surface worlders just stared after them with surprise and not a little disgust. "Figures," Jered spat after the silence had grown uncomfortably long. "Now what, Mercury?"

Coaxing Snyder out of his hiding spot had been unsuccessful until Ami exasperatedly dropped a large strip of red cloth next to him, showing the vain redhead that she knew where he was. He used it to cover the senshi uniform he was now wearing instead of his white and red robes. Unfortunately, it turned out that he couldn't do much for Ami except provide her with a temporary energy boost, not unlike a chemical stimulant, though they did learn that the feel of his holy magic disturbed her greatly. What both healers agreed on was that Mercury needed rest and good food to regain her strength, both of which were currently unavailable.

Ami had refused to stay in bed when she so pressingly needed assistants, and was now accompanying Cathy, Jered, and the gaggle of goblins on the second trip to the Underworld city. In a concession to the state of her health, she had gotten rid of the weighty pieces of metal armour, and was being carried on a new palanquin. Sure, she could have possessed another body, but her

own needed time to heal, and would be in a form of stasis while she was within one of her minions. The remaining goblins were trailing behind, chatting excitedly at the prospect of some entertainment in the city. This time, there was no welcoming committee, despite the fact that her group must have been looking ridiculous to the inhabitants of the cave. Except for herself, each and every member of her party was wearing Sailor Mercury's blue and white outfit with bows and miniskirt, even a grumbling Jered. The argument that the monsters here now associated the outfit with the Keeper who managed to defeat a Reaper had convinced him to go along with that, even if he was still grumbling from time to time.

As the group approached the city, Ami could see that the citizens tended to move in well-armed groups, much like her own. The few individual travellers always kept a hand near their weapon, as if expecting to be attacked at any point. All closed doors looked rather sturdy, and she could see massive locks and bars on the open ones. The atmosphere here was clearly one of mutual mistrust and barely veiled paranoia. She also noted that humans were vastly outnumbered by other creatures, many of which she couldn't name, though the majority seemed to be trolls. Most "people" here went for a very minimalistic clothing style, which made sense considering the local temperatures. The few exceptions were wearing long and gaudy robes and cloaks, and had an aura of magic surrounding them. More than once, denizens stopped on the stairs and pointed as Ami and her posse passed. She could hear them starting to whisper amongst each other, and frequently picked up the word "Reaper". It seemed that she had gained some kind of reputation already.

Instead of the large communal market the young Keeper had expected from a medieval city, there were individual shops strewn haphazardly all over the slopes of the canyon. All were advertising with signs that depicted the goods or services available here, probably for the benefit of the illiterate costumers. Many of the signs made Ami blush bright red, and Cathy wasn't faring much better. Even Jered's cheeks had taken on a rosy colour.

However, despite the distractions and sights, Ami found herself dozing off again and again, lulled into sleep by the swaying motions

of the palanquin, the heat, and the exhaustion hitting her like a ton of lead as Snyder's magic wore off faster than expected. From time to time, she woke and caught the tail end of a conversation or haggling process, or was woken to summon gold required to pay for the purchased items. All in all, the shopping trip was rather unexciting, and Jered seemed to have things well in hand. Ami could already see a new sword hanging from a belt around Cathy's waist, and a few of the goblins were holding bags full of groceries, raw materials for the lab, cloth, and various other conveniences that the dungeon couldn't produce for itself yet. She decided to transport the goods home with her power before the little greenskins managed to lose track of them. With a yawn, she sat up and stretched. "I'm feeling much better now. Thanks for taking care of things."

"Yes, we have almost everything on the list, except for clothing and armour. It might be best if you hired tailors or smiths for that, as they'll need to be custom made." Jered answered.

"Good. Did anything noteworthy happen that I should know about?"

Cathy grimaced. "Well, we ran into the group of thugs from before again. Oh, they didn't want to fight," she quickly continued upon seeing Ami's concerned expression, "but some wanted to know what the Reaper meant when he talked about the humiliations suffered by your hand. I'm afraid the goblins were only too happy to oblige."

Feeling still sleepy, and unaware that some of the passers-by were listening in, answered, "Oh. That doesn't sound so bad. They weren't around for most of them, anyway," and thus unwittingly added fuel to the rumour mill.

"I'm afraid you don't really get - ah well," the blonde seemed hesitant to talk about the topic, "there's another problem, too. We are missing six of the little pointy-eared freaks. They are probably off getting drunk, gambling away their wages, and talking about things they shouldn't be talking about."

Ami sighed, and used her Keeper sight to update herself on the location of her wayward minions. Quickly counting to six, she unceremoniously snatched up the troublemakers and yanked them back to a bare cell in her dungeon. Maybe that would help with

discipline, but she doubted it. "I have dealt with them," she informed the swordswoman. "That leaves hiring assistants, and a smith or two. How would I go about that?"

"Check the taverns," Jered suggested. The brown-haired man was sporting a new bandoleer full of daggers that clashed horribly with the sailor fuku, but so did his hairy legs. "That's where unemployed creatures hang around and recruiters look for them. We should also be able to find out about other Keepers in the area there."

The largest tavern of the city was impossible to miss, one just had to follow the smell of alcohol and the rowdy cries of the patrons. It was located in the lower levels of the city, which was the better part of town, due to the easier access to the heat and light provided by the lava river. A skewered helmet dangling from a chain served as sign of the Severed Head Inn, and Ami felt a glimmer of irritation at the casual disregard for life when she noticed that the skull inside was real. Her palanquin wouldn't fit through the door into the grotto-like interior, so she had to get out and walk on her own. One of the duo of burly troll bouncers leered at her scantily clad body. She gave it her best glare, eyes flashing red, haughty expression and all. The creature shrank back and made way for her group.

Ami took a first step into the room, and immediately her nose was assaulted by a smell that was a mix of tobacco and more intoxicating substances. The haze in the air was so thick that the lighting was dim despite the multitude of burning braziers lining the walls. The establishment looked like a wide, refurbished tunnel. Along the entire left side ran a long counter, with mugs and glasses of different sizes than only the standard ones on top. Most of the tableware was terracotta, not glass, and she didn't even recognise a tenth of the brews standing on the shelves. To be honest, she didn't think that would be any different if she stepped into a Tokyo bar, as she had led a rather sheltered life. Following the theme of 'one-size-doesn't-fit-all', the furniture was a wild mishmash of small and big. Some enterprising interior designer had made the stunning observation that small creatures could pass through spaces sized for large ones, but not the reverse, and acted on the obvious conclusions. Near the entrance of the tavern, chairs and tables were sized for giants, but became smaller and smaller the deeper one

walked into the room. The human-sized furniture was located around the middle, and Ami, who was a fourteen-year old Japanese girl of average size, felt rather intimidated surrounded by so many beings much larger than her. It didn't help that many of the guests stopped talking and eyed her speculatively when she entered. She overheard some of the commentary, and it made her ears burn. Stupid goblins!

"...that her?" "Seen it himself..." "...riding the Reaper like..." "...even possible with the size difference..?" "...heard she made them exchange bodies first..." "Kinky."

The comments from some of the completely inhuman creatures were the most disturbing. Seriously, what was a giant orange lizard even doing in here, sipping something unidentifiable from a bowl? And that mass of green tentacles taking up two of the chairs in the corner... She shuddered, but grit her teeth and held her head high, going as far as to summon some magic for the sole purpose of making her eyes glow brighter. She was here to recruit some hirelings, and looking weak wasn't an option. Behind her, she heard the re-assuring steps of her companions as they followed her toward an empty table.

Last edited: Aug 14, 2016

Assistants Acquired

Originally on 2009-10-30T00:20:00

"YOU DID WHAT?" the black cat with the crescent moon on her forehead shouted. Usagi was sure her long blonde braids were being blown back by the force of the shout. She skidded backward, polishing the wooden floor of the Shinto shrine with the seat of her pants as she retreated from the irate feline advancing on her, claws extended.

"Er, I kind of promised Mrs. Mizuno that we would do everything in our power to get Ami back," the blonde said with an embarrassed smile on her face. Luna twitched, while Rei's face gradually went redder and redder, until it matched the colour of the lower part of her shrine maiden robes.

"How could you just blow our secret like that, you meatball head?" Rei exploded. If her right arm hadn't been in a sling, she might have lunged for her friend's neck.

"Now wait a minute! I'm not that stupid! I went as Sailor Moon to talk with her, of course!" the blonde defended herself, giving the raven haired girl and her feline advisor pause.

"Well, I suppose that's fine then," the fierce-tempered shrine maiden deflated.

Luna sat down on the mat that her 'owner' had occupied a moment before. "Usagi, why did you go talk to her in the first place?"

"She called me on the phone because she knows I'm Ami's friend, and wanted to know if she had given any indication that she wanted to run away, or if I had any idea where she could be," the blonde explained. "She just sounded so sad and desperate, as if she had cried all night," Usagi sighed, eyes brimming with unshed tears.

"I admit that the situation must be hard on her," Luna conceded, anger evaporating, "especially with those missing person posters

everywhere to remind her. What precisely did you tell her?"

"I told her that Ami had gone missing during one of the monster attacks, and that we Sailor Senshi were hard at work trying to get her back, and that she was fine, as far as we knew," Usagi gushed, turning her attention to the shrine maiden kneeling before the stone block upon which the sacred fire burned. "You'll find her, now that you are finally out of the hospital, right Rei?"

"I will certainly do my best," the black-haired girl agreed as she knelt down in front of the fire and closed her eyes in concentration, before reciting meditative words.

"Usagi," Luna kept her voice down in order to not disturb Rei, "while I don't think what you did was very cautious, I can't really disagree with it. Just leaving Ami's mother to worry about what happened to her daughter when we know seems cruel."

Within the dancing flames, a picture formed. It showed a square table in a dark room, easily recognisable as a bar by the foaming tankards resting on the stained and skewed wood. The figure with short, blue hair in the centre of the vision, staring down into the lone untouched tankard, elicited a happy gasp from the observers a world away.

"That's Ami!" Usagi stated needlessly. She inspected the picture a bit more closely, taking note of the tall blonde woman with a facial scar sitting to Ami's left, and of the shifty-looking man with wavy brown hair on her right. "Why is she wearing a bikini, and why is everyone except her wearing Sailor Mercury's uniform?"

Luna's perplexed look, very expressive for a cat face, demonstrated aptly that the diminutive advisor had no good answer for that. A moment later, the Ami in the transparent picture looked up, and suddenly, Luna was arching her back, fur standing on end, and flattening her ears to her skull. Even Usagi paled and leaned back, startled "Why are her eyes glowing? What has happened to Ami?"

"I can sense Evil, but it feels different than that of the Dark Kingdom," Rei provided an additional piece of information and clarifyed nothing.

The blonde leaned forward again, chewing on the fingers of her right hand when a hunchbacked, knobbly-nosed creature that could only be a youma approached the table in the vision. Do something, Ami! Why was nobody reacting to its approach?

Rei frowned when droplets of sweat began to gather in her eyebrows, and the picture started to waver. Now, Ami said something, and her empty hand suddenly held a gold coin, which she presented to the green creature on her open palm. The youma nodded once and took the offered gold with lumpish fingers, then shimmered and disappeared into thin air.

"Can't hold the vision any longer," Rei groaned, and the unnaturally calm flames returned to their normal motion even as the flickering picture disappeared. The two girls and one cat looked at each other in silence while they considered what they had seen, and then the shrine erupted with the noise of questions and wild speculation.

"That's the smith," Jered said, ticking off one item of the list. "I hope the quality of his work is better than that of the ale here."

Ami peered into the tavern's haze, suppressing a groan at the sight of the next applicants. There was black leather shining like wet slime in the dim light, clinging to voluptuous bodies and leaving nothing to the imagination. "Not more of them," the young Keeper whispered, sounding tired.

"Why hello there, you must be Keeper Mercury. I must say, I have heard *intriguing* things about you," the woman, for the outfit left no doubt about that, breathed throatily. "I hear you are hiring. I'm looking forward to serving *under* you." She leaned forward, resting both of her palms on the table. If Ami had been distracted by the jiggling mounds straining against form-fitting black leather (she was not), then the sight of the razor-sharp claws attached to the job applicant's gloves cutting narrow furrows into the weathered wood would have snapped her out of it. Jered, however, seemed hypnotised by the displayed cleavage, much to the annoyance of Cathy, who sent him a death glare that went entirely unnoticed.

"I'm afraid I'm looking for a very specific skill set," Ami shrank away into her chair as the woman seemed to undress her with her eyes and licked her lips.

"I just bet you are," the dark mistress winked underneath the mask that enveloped the top half of her head. "I assure you that my skills are *extensive*. You could even say that I know the human body *inside-out*." She slid closer by sitting down on the table, incidentally toppling Cathy's tankard, which emptied its contents into the blonde's lap. "Why you..."

Ignoring the swordswoman, Ami held up her hands, palms facing outward in defence "I'm afraid you really aren't what I'm looking for, sorry."

The woman's lips narrowed into a pout, but then she shrugged and leaned so close that Ami could feel the hot breath on her skin. "Ah well. That won't stop us from comparing past *experiences*, will i-Ahgh!"

Something dragged the black-clad seductress backward with irresistible force, away from the blue-haired Keeper and off the table. The woman bumped her chin on the edge before dropping out of sight. Ami heard a pleased little moan instead of the expected grunt of pain, but nevertheless leaned forward to get a look into the blind angle that the woman had disappeared down into. "Um, are you all right?" To her left, Cathy's chair screeched over the ground loudly as she pushed it away from something that Ami couldn't see, teeth clenched together in a grimace that looked half-frightened, half-disgusted.

"Go away you useless tart! Clearly, this Keeper is looking for something more exotic*!"*

The words seemed to form directly in Ami's head, and she blinked in surprise and looked around for the origin. "Excuse me? Where exactly are you?"

"Right here. Let me just get up on the chair." There was some shuffling under the table, followed by slurping sounds that didn't inspire any confidence in Ami. With slithering noises, a handful of

worm-like pseudopods rose into her field of vision from below the table's edge, wiggling, glistening wetly, and confirming her misgivings. *"I'm sure you will find me very - useful."*

Ami stared with wide eyes at the green tentacles pointing into the air like beanstalks, and felt like pounding her head on the table. Instead, she simply buried her face in her palms and let out a soft whimper.

"I must confess that I am a bit taken aback by Mercury's choice of hirelings," Snyder said as he inspected the row of new minions waiting in the Reaper's old room, standing lined up next to each other, facing the throne. Ami didn't manage to fill out the large, intricately carved stone seat, and its marble felt cold and hard against her bare skin. However, these new minions were straight from the Underworld, and she figured that projecting the right image would go a long way in keeping them in line. Thus, she looked down on them from her elevated position with a severe expression on her face as she gave them an introduction to her dungeon, and to the tasks she expected them to perform.

"It is sad when the trolls look the most confidence-inspiring of the bunch," Jered agreed quietly. Mostly, he seemed glad to be back in pants and a green shirt as he stood next to the acolyte.

The redhead let his gaze wander over the new henchmen. The soot-covered troll with a leather apron, bulging muscles, and huge protruding tusks made sense to him. He had the look of a blacksmith. The slightly smaller, knobbly-nosed creature standing to the right of the first seemed to be a female of the troll species, possibly the first one's mate?

"Tailor," Cathy clarified, having followed Snyder's gaze.

The next three figures in the row were clearly magic users. The leftmost of the men was bald except for an unkempt white moustache and tufts of wild hair of the same colour that stood out from his temples. The stained coat he was wearing might have been the colour of bleached bone once, but currently, it looked as if the

old geezer had fallen on a painter's palette at some point. In addition, the garment's lapels were singed, and odd smells emanated from it. The second of the trio was the shortest and fattest of the whole bunch, and the one that made Snyder the most uncomfortable. He looked like a monk of indeterminate age, with black hair in a tonsure and a clean-shaven face. His habit, however, was no simple sack-cloth affair. Rich blue silk covered all over with blasphemous symbols in gold thread contained the man's flabby form, and the cord half-hidden by the bulging belly glittered with silver. If his clothing hadn't been so tattered, Snyder might have been impressed. No, what disturbed him most were the solid black eyes of the man.

The third magic user looked like a generic evil wizard to the young acolyte. He was tall, haggard enough to look underfed, wore a black robe with high collar, and had slicked down hair and a long, cascading beard. Nothing unusu- wait a minute. Snyder took a closer look at the beard. Yes. It *was* fake! Upon closer inspection, he also noted the unusually smooth skin and youthful features that the brown bristles were hiding. "Why did Mercury hire these... people?" the priest-in-training asked, turning to Jered.

The man's wavy hair shook as he shrugged. "They were the only ones who weren't either trying to molest her, or afraid she'd molest them."

Snyder's mouth opened as if to phrase a question, but instead he just pointed mutely at the final new minion. The green mound of rolled-up tentacles quivered, and a green pseudopod rose from the main mass and gave a friendly wave in the redhead's direction.

"Anti-bimbo defence measure," Cathy answered the unasked question, pretending not to hear Jered's sour grumble, "long story. Anyway, they won't go near it."

"*I* wouldn't go near it," Snyder said, giving the strange creature another glance. Was that eyestalk winking at him?

"Well, it also doesn't want much pay," the blonde added. Privately, she agreed with the acolyte.

"... and so I hope you will all -" Mercury suddenly stopped talking and got a faraway look in her eyes, before turning to address the trio of adventurers. "The frog just transformed back."

Last edited: Dec 31, 2017

Production Model

Originally on 2009-11-02T01:25:00

The resident of the deep, square pit had reverted from an oversized green amphibian to his true form, and immediately used his increased lung capacity to voice his displeasure at his current situation.

"Keeper! You little witch! I knew you were rotten to the core! Knew it from the start!" Boris the barbarian frothed up at the faces of his captors, who were peering over the edge of his prison. He homed in on Ami, who had expected no better of him.

"Should we get him out of there?" Snyder asked to her left, scratching his chin.

"And you! Traitors all! Spineless, snivelling cowards, bowing your legs before a Keeper to save your own hides! You are even worse! Turning your backs on the Light and all that is Good! If I ever get my fingers on you-"

"What do you *think*?" Cathy sneered at the redhead.

"Well, we can't just keep him in that pit forever," Ami said, then ducked under a thrown pebble.

"He's certainly making that sound like a favourable option," Cathy grumbled. "Hey, stop it you moron! We aren't actually evil, we just joined up because there was no other way out!"

Jered risked poking his head over the edge of the pit once more, investigating the clanging noises from below. "I agree that keeping him down there doesn't sound very feasible. Mainly because he's hacking handholds into the stone with that axe of his."

Ami sighed and stepped closer to the edge. "Mr. Boris. Why don't you put that axe down and let us talk about this calmly?"

"I'll put this axe down after I have taken your head!" came the roared answer from below, and the sounds of furious hacking redoubled.

"Come now. You must be aware that you couldn't possibly defeat us all alone," the short-haired girl tried again.

"I'll bloody well try!" the answer shot back without the slightest hesitation.

Ami turned to look at the others helplessly. The brown-haired man standing to her right just shrugged his shoulders, while Snyder shook his head.

"Just take his axe away, put some bars on top on the pit, and leave him to stew for a while," Cathy suggested. "You can let him out when we have beaten back the Baron, because it won't matter at that point whether he divulges our location or not. And if we lose... well, I suppose the heroes will free him."

"I suppose it's the only option for now," Ami conceded, hanging her head. From the pit, a stream of profanities informed the group about what Boris thought of that plan.

"You'll take my axe over my dead body," the trapped brute promised.

Ami clenched her fists in anger. Why did that big nitwit have to make everything difficult? She didn't have time for this! Without further ado, she dropped an imp on his head. The creature squealed in surprise as it impacted with the giant's skull. Scrambling for purchase, the little bug-eyed minion caught hold of Boris' shaggy black mane. Its arms barely managed to encircle the huge man's head, and its eyes found themselves on the same height as the man's chin as it hung around Boris' neck like a grotesque necklace. Despite the blow to his head and the creature trying not to drown in his beard, the warrior kept a strong grip on his weapon. A slender shadow plunged down from above even as he took one hand of the haft off his axe to claw at the imp in his hair.

Ami jumped after the imp. If Sailor Moon could take out three mind-controlled musclemen in senshi form at once, then surely a single,

distracted opponent should be no problem. The senshi of Mercury knew that she was acting slightly irrationally, but she felt that if she didn't vent some anger and frustration soon, she would explode. Besides, she was reasonably sure that she was physically superior to the man while transformed. Her opponent's eyes shone with fury and sudden hope as she alighted on the bottom of the square hole in the ground that was barely as wide as two men were tall. His grin became a howl of pain as the imp pulled itself upward and bit into his lower lip, giggling in glee. Ami used the distraction to close the distance, ducking under an axe swing that never came near her. Boris had never been the most precise of fighters, and the imp blocking his line of sight didn't help his accuracy any. The stunned observers above were treated to the sight of a slight blue-haired girl dressed only in a bikini top and a loincloth darting toward the raging giant, and then sweeping his legs out from under him.

The man sat up with a growl, and the imp attached to his face let go and hurled itself aside, letting out a frightened yelp as it somersaulted out of the path of Ami's incoming fist. The smack of knuckles impacting skin ping-ponged around the walls of the shaft, its echo persisting even after the man's head jerked back from the shock, slackening features seemingly distorted by the force of the blow. A spray of foamy spittle flew from Boris' mouth, and a large bruise started to form on his cheeks moments after he hit the ground.

Ami stood over her defeated opponent and instinctively raised her fist in triumph. She was surprised at how euphoric this felt. Despite her aching muscles, she found herself revitalised and full of energy. With a start, she realised that she had picked the most up-close and personal way of disarming her opponent, without giving much thought to less vicious alternatives. Oh, sure, this had probably be the fastest way to do it, but not necessarily the most gentle or safest. Was being in a brutal environment like this influencing her behaviour? If she was completely honest with herself, she had been wanting to beat some sense into the bigoted giant for a long time. Why had she given in to these violent impulses? Was it because the social contract that would frown upon such an action did not apply here? Was it the stress, or was something more sinister at work? Feeling cold all of a sudden, she walked over to where Boris' axe

had fallen, picked it up, and sent it to her treasure chamber. Then, she knelt down to the unconscious man and healed the bruising on his cheek. It was the least she could do.

She teleported out of the pit, and immediately Jered was on her case "Mercury! What were you thinking? You could have gotten hurt or killed, and you are vital for everyone's continued survival here! Don't be so reckless!"

"I know," Ami muttered, turning away. "I don't want to talk about it. Imps! get a mattress and a bucket down there! And put some bars on top!"

The rest of the day was very busy for Ami. The more underlings she acquired, the more important it became to solve the transformation issue, as all of them were using equipment of some sort or other that could be overwritten by the involuntary clothing change. She had taken a moment to put on the spare Sailor Mercury uniform in her room, and now felt more like herself again. After looking over the footage she had recorded of the dungeon heart during multiple transformations in the Reaper body, and then comparing the results with the data of Cathy using Shabon Spray and Shabon Spray Freezing, she had some idea on how to get rid of the problem. Apparently, there was some sort of minor backwash of her own magic when she transformed, which travelled along the mystical connections between her employees and the dungeon heart and applied the cosmetic changes to anything it encountered. Now that she was aware of the mechanism, she already had some ideas about how to stop it. A specifically tuned ward on the Heart could simply ground the surge, but simply concentrating hard enough might also be able to do the trick. She'd get Snyder to make that ward, she decided. He wasn't getting along very well along with her new assistants. Speaking of which...

The laboratory had been expanded to provide space for the needs of five researchers. Only a few of Ami's more impressive failures at golem designs were still in the room, shoved against the right wall,

where they served as decorative, if disturbing, candle holders. The centrepiece of the laboratory was the huge sturdy table upon which documentation, open books, and various bubbling cauldrons rested. An open space with workbenches and a bunch of stacked rectangular rocks occupied the left side of the chamber, while the wall directly opposite the entrance held the shelves containing tomes scavenged from Arachne's dungeon. While spacious by any standards, the lab still seemed too small to hold the egos of two of the researchers, which were clashing violently as a result.

In the left corner, half bald with tufts of white hair and moustache of same colour, an old man was stirring a large pot of bubbly liquid. A green, three-fingered hand reached up out of the soup, but he whacked it with a long iron spoon, and it retreated back under the surface. Pulling a small vial out of a coat pocket, he carefully dripped three drops into the mixture, and then quickly slammed the lid on the concoction, securing it with a half-turn. On cue, the pot started to dance around while something inside banged against its metal walls and let out horrible shrieks. The mad professor nodded to himself, seemingly satisfied. "A further fine step towards unravelling the secrets of the universe!"

Sitting at the table, a pale man with his hair in tonsure looked up from his book on the table. The two chairs his fatty bulk was occupying creaked in protest as he shoved them backward to better face the taller speaker in the stained coat. "What would an insane alchemist like you know about the mysteries of the universe, anyway? Trying to glean insight from mixing base elements, you are pathetic. My infinitely superior knowledge stems from my god Himself!"

The shaking of the kettle stopped, and the gap between the lid and the pot widened on its own, revealing that the piece of cooking equipment had grown a set of serrated iron fangs. The white-haired researcher poked it expectantly with his spoon once, then retreated a step as the container began spinning rapidly around its own axis. Despite the distraction, he found time to look over his shoulder and reply "And where is your god now? Oh, right, dissolving in the stomach of Azzathra, you ex-high priest of a dead god!" the man in the stained coat taunted, "How does it feel to have gambled on the

wrong horse and lost everything?"

The solid black eyes of the fat, blue-robed man seemed to suck in the light as he spat out a single, hateful word. His mocker bent over and dropped to the ground in total silence, grimacing and writhing as if suffering in unbearable agony. "I bet not as much as *that*," the evil monk snickered. "Let that be a lesson to you: I may have lost most of my power, but I am still far stronger than a madman like you will ever be!"

It was this situation that Ami teleported into. Taking one look at the man on the floor, she ordered "Stop that right now! What do you think you are doing? I hired you to do research, not fight among each other!" She rushed to the old man's side, kneeling down to check his pulse, and nodded with relief that the spasms had stopped.

"Ah, Keeper," the monk spun around to address her directly, "we were just discussing the issue of who will be the head researcher. I think we have come to a satisfying conclusion." The expression on his sallow, pale features was not exactly mocking, but certainly came into spitting distance of it. "Or does anyone else of you care to dispute my leadership qualities?"

Ami looked around and spotted Snyder and the tall, black robed wizard huddling together under the lab's table, shaking their head rapidly. The contortions required to get the latter's long, haggard frame into that cover couldn't be good for his back. The twitching form of the white-haired alchemist on the ground was in no shape to object, either.

"You see, Keeper? One possible source of potential inefficiency already thwarted." He met the blue-haired girl's gaze with his own.

Ami suppressed a shudder. Those dead-looking eyes gave her the creeps, and she held no illusions that the man was anything but an entirely loathsome, self-serving evil bastard. The only reason she had hired him was that she had precious little other options, and his knowledge of the arcane arts certainly seemed impressive. *Besides, while he is here in my dungeon, he won't be doing evil elsewhere.*

Still, he had been bullying her other minions already. She could reprimand him, but that would lead to resentment, and there might be more power struggles that she didn't need. If she said nothing, she would send the wrong signals. What to do? Ah, this might just work. "Your willingness to shoulder the responsibility for the team's progress, *or lack thereof*, does you credit." She even managed to keep the sarcasm out of her voice. Ah, that wiped the self-satisfied expression right off his face. "However, I will require Snyder for a side project that is unrelated to the main one."

The redhead's face lit up at that prospect, and he scrambled to get out of his shelter. "Ah yes, yes. I'm certain you picked a job for which my special expertise makes me uniquely qualified," he said, brushing the dust out of his bowl-shaped haircut.

"No problem, the bumbler is pretty useless anyway," the fat mystic replied. "We might actually progress faster without him getting underfoot."

Snyder had a sour look on his face as he stomped over to Ami's side, but didn't dare contradict the newly appointed head researcher. She noted that he had already visited the troll tailor, as the cut of his new robes was much better than his toga had ever been, even if the cloth was still re-purposed red curtain. "Speaking of progress, how are you coming along with these ideas of mine?" the young Keeper asked.

The dark monk wobbled over to the table, picking up a heap of papers covered in tight scribbles. "Well, Keeper, your work on adapting the imp spell to animate golems instead is rather amazing. I would not have enjoyed the months of working out all those equations myself." With the flattery out of the way, he dared progress to the criticism "However, I have my doubts about the usefulness of the golems you intend to create. They will have the strength of imps, which, even if you use multiple imps, will not add up to much."

"I have a way around that," Ami dismissed his concern with more confidence than she felt. "Have you thought of a strategy for solving the coordination issue?"

The monk raised an eyebrow at her answer, revealing more of the pure black orbs under his eyelids. "Oh, that one will be easy. Your basic templates are imps, which are already wired to obey the orders from their Keeper without question, even without spoken communication. We can build on that. If the imps bound to the construct recognise the entity in charge of the whole construct as their Keeper, they will cooperate without question or hesitation."

Ami got a thoughtful look on her face as she considered the implications. None of the ones she was coming up with were very palatable. "Do you have any particular method in mind to achieve this?"

The man nodded, making his double chin quiver. "You will have to create a new imp variant that has a stronger connection to the dungeon heart, and imprint some of your own personality on it. Possibly erase its own mind first, but destroying a mind is much simpler than rebuilding it anyway," his hand went to his collar in an unconscious gesture, grasping for something that was no longer there. "Alternatively, you could torture some of your useless goblins to death and use their tormented ghosts to-"

"NO!" Ami quickly interrupted him. "I want these constructs to be entirely conjurable from thin air and magic," she elaborated when he looked angry by her quick dismissal of his suggestion. "I don't expect them to survive long in battlefield conditions, so they must be easy to replace."

"I see." Tasbaal leafed through his pages of script again, frowning "That spells doom for the more complex multi-part designs. Those would have to be assembled under lab conditions, as the individual parts alone are sufficiently complicated to require a dedicated use of the manufacturing spell. A shame, really. There is some real potential there."

"I'll defer to your judgement then," Ami nodded, "we'll focus on getting one of the simpler models to work as fast as possible. I don't care what the result looks like, as long as it's useful. There will be time to refine the process at a later point."

"As you wish, Keeper. As for the fabrication spell, that's his job," the

man in the rich but tattered robes pointed at the floor, "but he seems to be sadly unavailable at the moment. Lanky! Update the Keeper on our achievements!"

"Th-that's not really my nam-" the beanstalk-like wizard in the black robes started to protest, but was rudely cut off by the fat ex-priest.

"NOW!"

"Yes, Master!" The much taller, but soft-spoken warlock approached hastily, nearly tripping over his feet in the process. "Keeper? As you can see, we have researched a matter rearrangement spell that already allows for some directed fabrication in a two-dimensional plane, all that remains is to..."

Now reasonably sure that her new minions wouldn't be killing each other and were actually doing what they wanted them to do, Ami transported herself to the first library, whose colours were still as black as the day she created it.

"Oh, it's you, Mercury." Jered was sitting at one of the reading tables, an inactive crystal ball to his right. His palms were resting on a stack of colourful papers, which Ami recognised as different styles of maps. From what she could see, they were varying vastly in quality. Some were simple dots and lines on yellowed parchment, others were drawn in a rich style with elaborate mountains and fortresses and pictures of dragons, and yet others looked more like what she expected from modern maps. "This shifty trader came through with his promise of providing us maps, though he charged an arm and a leg for it. However, as you can see, it's all a big mess." He swept some trinkets out of the way, making enough room on the polished charcoal-coloured surface to spread some of the parchments next to each other. "Some of them overlap, all use different scales, and a few even contradict each other."

"Thank you for handling this for me," Ami smiled. "Now let's see what I can do with this." The maps were of great interest to her, as they were her first glance at the geography of this new world. The bluish glass of her visor slid over her eyes, and she pulled out her

Mercury computer and started typing. With each map scanned, her picture of the world became a bit clearer as she scaled and rotated the different pieces on her screen, slowly assembling the patchwork into a coherent whole. The wavy-haired man stared over her shoulder as she worked.

"That's useful magic, he commented," seemingly impressed. "I don't think even most nobles have a map that shows that much of the world. Too bad it's so small on that screen, though."

Ami entered her final keystrokes. "Actually, I just returned from the lab. The fabrication spell I need isn't complete yet, but for flat surfaces, such as maps, it should work fine already. The blue-haired girl swivelled in her chair, facing one of the blank walls. She breathed in deeply and focused on her connection with the dungeon heart, pulling in mana and shaping it to match the pictures on her screen. On the wall, a glowing rectangle materialised, matching the image in her mind.

"Not bad for a first try," Jered said, his voice sounding rather mewling as he was pinching his nose shut. "Is it supposed to smell like that?"

Ami fanned the air in front of her face with one hand. "Sorry, but unexpected side effects are to be expected with experimental and untested spells." She returned her attention to the continents displayed on the wall. It looked as if this world had three main landmasses, and her current location was on the north-western one, the largest of them all. The small, roundish continent to the east had been drawn in red and black on most maps, and after a look at its name, the senshi realised why. The Avatar Island was a place that had been completely devastated by keepers around two decades ago, and was now covered in soot, sulphur, and lava. A true outpost of hell on the face of the world.

The elongated, boomerang-shaped continent to the south seemed friendlier, even though there were a lot of blank spaces. The region Ami's own dungeon was located on seemed comparatively tightly settled, which was a drawback, given current circumstances. She'd have to find a more secluded location once she figured out how to make new dungeon hearts, as she would otherwise be constantly

under siege once her location here became known. She frowned at the map, noting the closeness to this country's capital, and decided that she needed more strategic information. "Jered, did you learn anything about other Keepers while we were in the Underworld city?"

"A bit. There were some grumbling minions gossiping about previous employers. I think two or three might match your criteria. Single dungeon heart and independent. I only have a rough idea of where they are, and I'd basically have to work from landmarks these guys in the tavern mentioned."

"That's already a good starting point. Could you please outline the general areas on the map?" Ami requested. He did so, and she considered the hatched regions, which looked to be around a hundred kilometres across each. "Hmm, I had hoped for something more definite. Do you think you could go back to the Underworld and find out more? You don't have to accept, I know it's dangerous. Oh, and you can take the goblins as an escort. They are in the lowest tunnels at the forge, where Cathy is being fitted with new armour."

The brown-haired man was silent for a while, but then nodded reluctantly. "If finding and defeating another Keeper is the only way for you to learn how to move your dungeon heart to some safer place, we don't really have other options, so I'll do my part."

"Thank you. I appreciate it," Ami smiled at him. Her eyes were completely blue, which became a rarer and rarer event, as Jered had observed. Her thoughts returned to the golem research, and she teleported back to the laboratory, but had a nagging feeling in the back of her head that she was forgetting something.

The corridor was dark and empty, except for worm-like appendages that snaked forward, making soft wet slithering sounds that mixed with the droplets of water plummeting from the ceiling. The Keeper did not seem to be in a playful mood, which was boring, the tentacle monster noted. However, it was a fiercely independent creature, and could find other ways to amuse itself. Too bad the imps were scared of it, but exploring the dungeon was sort of fun too. Oh, what did we

have here? Looks like a prison cell, with the horizontal bars covering the pit. Occupied too! Lucky! The monster peered down at the huge sleeping figure on the mattress below. The bars were no hindrance to its squishy, deformable body, and within moments, the lump of tentacles disappeared down the hole. Time for the real amusement!

Ami had worked for hours, running herself and her team ragged. She had dark circles under her eyes and looked like death warmed over, but a smile was playing around her lips as she turned to Jered, Snyder and Cathy, who were staying close to the entrance of the door. Her lab assistants had pretty much collapsed where they stood, though in the case of the creepy monk, it looked as if he was sleeping with his eyes open.

"And here, I proudly present our first fully functional golem model." Ami stated, indicating the lumpy shape standing in the centre of the workspace. Its glittering form was only a head taller than the short-haired bluette.

"It's made of ice," Cathy sounded sceptical as she looked the humanoid form up and down. "How is it supposed to survive the rigours of combat?"

"Well, it's not only ice. It's filled with water inside," Ami explained.

"Water. Uh huh." The blonde's lack of appreciation for the creation was clearly audible in her voice.

Ami seemed undeterred by the lack of reaction. "The trick is that the water is malleable and needs no extra effort to move around, since it's animated, same as the outer hollow shell, adding extra power to the construct. Water and ice are basically the same thing, and turning one into the other just requires cooling or heating. So when the golem is moving and cracks form in its structure due to hull deformation, the water from inside spills into them and is magically frozen, fixing the damage. Same, if there's too much material during contraction, the excess can just be melted and stored within the golem's hollow. This approach is much, much cheaper energy-wise than either turning the required area elastic, or continuously

summoning and banishing new matter to allow for movement, as is done in conventional golems." She took a deep breath after that speech, gauging the reaction of her companions.

"Well, well, aside from the fact that it's made of ice, it looks as if a child put a few clumps of mud together in a rough approximation of the human shape," Snyder commented critically, "very unappealing."

"It doesn't matter what it looks like, as long as it works!" Ami grumbled in irritation. Sure, it wasn't a work of art, but it wasn't that bad. All in all, she had wished for a more enthusiastic reception of her project. "I guess you'll have to see it in action," she said. "Cathy, would you stab it, please? Don't worry, it won't fight back."

The blonde cautiously approached the shimmering figure, her new armour clanking around her. With a lightning-quick stab, she thrust her weapon at the thing's chest. There was momentary resistance when metal encountered ice, then a shattering noise, and the golem found itself impaled on the blade all the way through. "Well, that wasn't much of a challenge."

Ami just smirked and watched as the blonde attempted to pull the blade back. It didn't budge until the swordswoman put a considerable amount of force behind the motion. The weapon came free with a sloshing noise, and the ice re-sealed once the obstruction was gone. Except for a dent, Cathy's opponent seemed unharmed.

"Well, I admit they might be tougher than one would expect. How do you put them down?" she asked with professional interest.

"Too much damage at once, get rid of its water, or remove the block holding the controlling entity that's floating inside. They also don't take heat very well," the young Keeper explained. Everyone crowded around the icy shape to look through its transparent shell inside.

"The controller is that glowy piece of ice with your symbol on it within the head?" Jered asked. At Ami's nod, he said "Not too shabby. I imagine it's not easier to defeat than a regular warrior, then."

"I can't help but notice that it didn't regenerate the injury in the exact same shape as it was in before," Snyder remarked.

"Nicely spotted," Ami complimented. "That's a feature. The golem will adjust for loss of water by shrinking."

"What can it do offensively? You *are* using imps to power this, aren't you?" Cathy asked.

"Well... Golem! Target the hand of that statue over there, one shot! Fire when ready!" Ami ordered. The construct moved for the first time, slowly lifted its arm with a grinding noise that spoke of ice breaking and resealing itself continuously, too fast for the eye to follow. It pointed a single digit at the indicated target, and with a loud crack, the whole finger shot forward on a thin fountain of water. The projectile impacted its target, and both exploded into a cloud of glittering shards and stone chips.

"Okay, *now* I'm impressed," Snyder admitted. "How did you manage to teach it a magical ability?"

"No magic, just science. It uses water-filled interconnected tubes of different diameters to multiply the force that can be exerted by an imp, at the cost of speed, or the reverse. While it looks impressive, it is about equivalent to being hit with an imp's pick." Ami dumbed down the basic principles behind the inner workings of her golem. There was no real need to go into the details of the engineering problems she'd had to solve to avoid it shattering from the water pressure if it took heavy blows. "However, the slower it moves, the more power it can exert, up to the limits of what its ice can take, of course. It would be a bad idea to let yourself be grabbed by one."

"That re-grown finger looks much better than the original one," Jered pointed out.

Ami looked at the digit, which had the same shape as a human one now, and scratched her head in confusion. "Well, I don't know why it does that," she admitted.

"Can I test its combat skills properly?" Cathy asked. She had foregone her sword for a hammer she had picked from one of the

workbenches.

"By all means," Ami smiled. "Golem, no hydraulics, disable target!"

The two opponents started circling each other under the watchful eyes of the observers. Cathy darted in, striking a blow at the lumpy figure's shoulder that broke through the shell and sent water fountaining around. She quickly withdraw, seeing the opening already healing. The retaliatory punch of the animated construct was easily avoided. Soon, it became clear who the winner would be as the blonde darted in and out again and again, inflicting heavy damage on the creature while staying untouched.

"It sucks," Jered concluded, "fights like an imp."

"No, no. It is more skilled than that, but I think Ms. Cathy is still benefiting from these enchantments Mercury put on her. She might have more trouble if she was fighting with mere human ability."

Ami just watched quietly, noticing something disturbing. Whenever her golem healed, even if it was just from moving its own limbs, the regenerated shape became more human-like. A terrible suspicion started to form a few seconds into the battle, which was confirmed when Cathy took off most of the ice monster's head with a swing of her hammer. When it's face grew back, its frozen features were Ami's own. Shock turned to mortification when she noted that the similarities became more accurate and anatomically correct with each exchange of blows. "Stop! Wait!"

The combatants separated, and Jered let out an appreciative whistle at the sight, causing Ami's blush to darken.

"That shouldn't have happened! Why did it do that? Shabon Spray Freezing!" the embarrassed girl quickly covered the all-too-lifelike statue in a concealing layer of fresh ice. "Tasbaal! Explain yourself! What went wrong?"

The fat man pulled himself into sitting position with a tired wheeze. "Nothing. Everything went perfectly. If you are referring to the golem's increasing likeness to yourself, I assume that it has to do with the self-image of the controlling entity. It's based on you, has to

think of itself as similar to the Keeper, which is you, and therefore it will restore its body to look like you. No, it can't be fixed." With a yawn, he lay down again.

"But, but..." Ami stammered, still blushing.

"Whatever happened to 'it doesn't matter what it looks like, as long as it works'?" Jered taunted with a grin.

"I... Argh!" the teenager didn't have the option to sink into the ground from shame, but teleporting away was seeming more and more like an acceptable substitute.

"Wait, it's based on you, Mercury? Does that mean you gave it your combat skills too?" Cathy suddenly asked.

Glad to be back on a safe topic, Ami nodded.

"Well then, I'll expect you to join us for training tomorrow. Aside from your strength, speed, and magic, your fighting style is atrocious! Don't think I'll go easy on you if your skill affects the whole army!"

"Eep!" this last surprise was too much for the tired girl, and she disappeared into thin air.

A probing tentacle protruded from between the gaps between the bars over the pit, and fumbled for purchase. A second and a third joined it soon. Then, a jerk went through the green pseudopods, and two disappeared back down the hole, as if something had yanked on them from below.

"Argh! Let go, you big dolt! I don't want to be your rope!"

The third tentacle had wrapped itself around a bar and was resisting the pull from below, becoming thinner as it elongated elastically.

"No! Not more knots! Take your fingers off me, dammit!"

With a twoing noise, the slimy appendage lost its grip on the bar and followed its predecessors down.

"NOOOO! HEEELP!"

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Picking the First Target

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With one of her research projects completed more or less successfully, Ami felt that she could allow herself to flee to her bedroom and get good night's rest. She had moved her room and those of her companions to a new section of the dungeon that was off-limits to the most recently hired minions. None of them were trustworthy, so she was taking no chances. She didn't really expect any trouble from them right now, as they were as tired as she was, but it was better to be safe then sorry. In any case, a few traps and loyal imps would alert her long before any of them could get close to where she slept, if they dared go against her orders.

Ami's sleep was haunted by nightmares as her mind tried to come to terms with her recent experiences. Scenes replaying the bloody and painful ends of the men in Arachne's torture chamber and her own close brush with death during the Reaper's revolt flickered through her mind. Relentlessly, the dreams showed her odd mixtures and variations of the past events, often substituting the faces of those who had perished with those of her friends, or making her re-enact her battles, but being just a moment too slow to pull through. In yet others, she found herself pursued by the Baron, the horned Reaper, or both, and unable to fight back or shake them. In one of them, her skin was blue and sparkly, and she wasn't wearing any clothes. As a result of her over-active subconsciousness, Ami woke up drenched in sweat, feeling more rested than before, but still fatigued. Nevertheless, she had no inclination to go back to bed and face the unpleasantness again. Soaking in a good, hot bath sounded like a better idea right now.

Ami hadn't counted on being intercepted by Cathy, who seemed worryingly cheerful to the tired blue-haired girl. The blonde looked disgustingly relaxed and had pointed out quite logically that, if Mercury was going to take a bath, she should do so after training, or

she would just be sweaty again. Thus, the senshi now found herself within the dungeon's training yard, facing the taller woman.The square combat arena was set into a square depression and took up most of the domed chamber. Ami could walk across its soft sand and straw mix with less than ten steps, so there wasn't much room for really long jumps and bounds. She and her trainer were wearing identical white and blue sailor senshi uniforms, same as the goblins watching the proceedings with great interest. Of course, the child-sized green creatures had not taken much care of their equipment, so the whites were stained and the skirts were mostly tattered and gone. Fresh metallic pieces of armour that clashed in style with the girly uniforms gleamed in the torchlight as the pointy-eared beings took seats on the walls and posts surrounding the ring. They were happily munching on snacks that smelled very appetising to the short-haired teenager, who hadn't had breakfast yet, especially as the fresh food from the Undercity was a welcome change to the routine chicken and eggs.

"Ready? Remember, no magic, no teleportation, nothing that your golems couldn't do on their own! Now attack me and show me what you can do!" Cathy crouched down into a wide-legged combat stance, bringing her wooden practice sword up into a defensive position in front of her body.

"Why do you have a weapon and I don't?" Ami asked, aware that she was sounding whiny now.

"Because your unarmed golems are going to fight armed opponents," Cathy said, smiling.

Ami was getting the impression that the blonde was planning to enjoy this a little too much. The way the scar on her right cheek was bending as the muscles underneath firmed looked positively mischievous. "I could give them weapons! Ice spears or swords, for example!" she protested.

"Yeah, right. I'm sure that will work really well against proper armour. Now stop stalling and show me what you have got!"

Lips firming into a thin, determined line, Ami rushed forward, intent on throwing a punch at the blonde. "Ouch!" She quickly withdraw the

arm after the wooden sword whacked down on it, aborting the attack.

"That was visible from a mile away! Try again!"

The blue-haired girl's second attempt was more cautious. She feinted left, then darted in right to attack the taller woman's exposed flank. How she ended up head over heels on the ground with a smarting bump on her left temple, she had no idea.

"Put some effort into it!" Cathy demanded, frowning down at the girl on the straw. "Again!"

Ami decided to try kicks instead, if only to use their longer reach. For a change, the move didn't end with sudden pain, and she felt encouraged enough to try another blow, and another. The enthusiasm waned a bit when she realised that her success wasn't due to any improvement, but simply to the fact that the swordswoman wasn't retaliating. Instead, the long-haired blonde swayed left and right, seemingly dancing around Mercury's strikes with little effort. What wasn't dodged was parried easily, and the blonde's expression became more and more sour. Ami felt herself growing irritated at the treatment. "Sailor Mercury Kick!" She launched herself into the air, unleashing a textbook-precise flying kick at Cathy. A moment later, she slammed into the dirt, hard, and spat sand.

"What the hell was that supposed to be?" Cathy shouted angrily. "Taking the time to alert your opponent to your next attack is wasted effort, as your moves are easily readable already. 'Sailor Mercury Kick' indeed." She turned away from the girl, who was slowly picking herself off the ground, and started stalking left and right. "You have the same magical enchantments as I do, I would assume, so why are you so much slower and weaker?"

"Well, you are fully grown and trained," Ami pointed out as she brushed the sand and straw off her skirt. They made the ground look way softer than it felt, she noted.

"That shouldn't make that much of a difference! You shouldn't suck this much unless you rarely exercised and never got into any brawls

as a kid!"

"Sorry. I didn't," the younger girl said, clasping her hands in front of herself. She wasn't sure what to think about a teacher scolding her for *not* fighting.

"It figures," Cathy reflected. "Wait, you mentioned being some sort of monster hunter. You should already have *some* combat experience!" the blonde whirled around abruptly, making her hair fan out like a golden halo.

"I learned how to get out of the way of attacks," Ami answered. "I stayed out of close combat range. You might have noticed that my transformation doesn't come with any weapons."

"Well, not dying is the most important part of combat," Cathy nodded, "at least that's something. Of course, I'll have to test just how good you are at that." She showed rows of white teeth as she grinned. "Of course, after that we'll have to see about getting you properly in shape. A long run each morning should be a good start, and then-"

Ami took a step back and raised her hands defensively "Ah, thanks for the offer, but no. My physical capabilities won't influence the golems, only my skill, so there is really no need for that. Let's focus on the essentials for now, please."

Cathy looked slightly disappointed at the lost opportunity, but a grin soon graced her features again. "Very well then. Time to test your reflexes!"

Ami's smile became strained.

"Right, I think you have the blow-avoiding down more or less," Cathy confirmed and pulled back her extended sword arm. "you could do better still if you learned to use more sidesteps and ducked more instead of just throwing yourself out of the way, but your defence is certainly better than your offence. So we are going to focus on teaching you how to beat things up properly!"

Ami, sitting in the dirt, looked up with resignation as the blonde's gaze swept over the jeering goblins hanging out in the chamber. The senshi was breathing a bit harder from the recent exertion as she rose to her feet.

"Maybe you should start sparring with them," Cathy extended her thumb, pointing over her shoulder toward the green child-sized beings. Upon seeing the sceptical looks on the young Keeper's and the green-skins' faces, she reconsidered. "Well, it was just an idea. You'd probably spend more time patching them up after breaking them than learning anything." Suddenly, her smile widened. "Oh, I know! Get some golems in here and fight those! That way, we can teach you and evaluate them at the same time.

Great. Punching and kicking the ice-things would feel just like hitting stone, Ami figured and slumped her shoulders. It was a *reasonable* suggestion, though, and she couldn't really object. Straightening, she pointed one hand at an empty corner of the arena. A quick Shabon Spray Freezing summoned the raw materials, which she kneaded into a humanoid form and hollowed out with the fabrication spell that her researchers had developed. Adding the hydraulic tubes and cylinders within the limbs required more precision, and Ami gritted her teeth in concentration. Then came the part where she animated the hull, internal parts, and the water by imbuing them with disembodied imps. She stopped for a moment to consider her handiwork before moving on to the final step.

At first, Ami had been worried that basing part of the creation's controlling intelligence on herself might make copies of her, doomed to a nightmarish existence of inescapable slavery within an inhuman body. However, as part of the spell required her to possess the entity, she could directly observe its mind, which laid her fears to rest. Its thoughts remained those of an imp; a dark, vicious, *alien* stream of thoughts closer to animal than to human, even after she burned her modifications into its self. It *thought* it was her, but it certainly *wasn't*, and could never be. Naturally, this made the chain of command interesting. Fortunately, what the being considered itself to be had no influence on what it actually was. Imps took orders and didn't give them, and that was that. So whenever it followed commands from Ami, it justified this to itself by feeling that

they *clearly* had been its own idea in the first place. It was the Keeper, after all!

The boxy ice construct now looming in the corner gleamed in all rainbow colours as the torchlight broke within its water-filled innards. Cathy leaned against the wall, looking bored as she tapped her feet. Apparently, she'd had the time to go and make herself a cup of tea while Ami cast her spell. "Finally. Is that the fastest you can produce them? Because we'll need more than that."

"At the moment, yes, but my assistants are currently working on merging all the steps of the procedure into a single spell. There's no modification or adjustment required between castings, so the pattern can be stored within the dungeon heart and just empowered when I need it, which should make the casting time near-instant."

"That's good." Cathy eyed the icy figure critically. She could make out the faint glitter of the Mercury symbol within its head, slowly sinking lower as its anchor piece drifted within the water-filled hollow. "How many of them can you maintain, anyway?"

"I haven't been able to test the limits yet, and it depends on the ambient heat of the environment, but theoretically, about fifty should be the maximum. Less if the water isn't pure enough," Ami ventured an educated guess.

"I see. Get that prototype over here too so we can start, I don't particularly feel like waiting for you to make more," the blonde ordered, putting down her cup, and returning to being all business.

With a sigh, Ami yanked the ice golem that looked exactly like her through space, making it appear next to its more lumpy sister. It was wearing a short, sack-like brownish dress with holes for the head and arms in order to protect its - or rather, Ami's - modesty. While the magic holding the construct together prevented its ice from thawing, air humidity was condensing against its cold exterior and giving it a humid coating. As wet cloth was wont to do, the drab garment clung to the statue's curves suggestively, making Ami blush as she caught sight of it. "I really need to find a way to fix that," she stammered.

"If anyone asks, say it's to distract male opponents," Cathy suggested. "Now all of you, get into position!"

Ami entered her throne room, which had formerly been the Reaper's, still in the process of drying her hair with a towel after taking a bath. She had made some adjustments to the place to make it more suitable for her needs, the foremost of which were the pillows for the cold, hard marble throne. Gone were the huge demon statues glaring down at visitors from their aisles, and she had re-arranged the rows of pillars leading from the door to her seat. Now, they stood in a circle instead of flanking the long red carpet, framing a square stone table. It had seats for twenty people, more than Ami had minions right now, unless she counted the goblins or imps. She didn't, as neither of those had any business being here for this meeting.

On the side closest to her throne stood Snyder, Cathy, and Jered. The latter took a look at Mercury's bruised face and arms, and winced. Turning to his blonde girlfriend, he asked "That looks painful. Did some good come out of her training? And do you think it's wise to antagonise a Keeper like that?"

The swordswoman shrugged "She's no longer relying purely on being faster and stronger than her opponent, but you can't expect to train a novice up into a useful fighter in just a few hours. Let's just say she had better stick to throwing magic at things from a safe distance."

"Regrettable. Very regrettable. What does this mean for the fighting ability of the constructs? Can they still fulfil their role?" Snyder asked worriedly.

Cathy laughed. "Oh, there's no problem there, I think. I had Mercury spar against them for practice, and to further evaluate what they can do. They aren't very fast or skilled, but whenever she was too slow to pull an extended limb back after an attack, they would grab onto it, and there's no getting loose once they have clamped down on something. At least not without breaking off their arms."

"That explains the bruises," Jered noted, looking up and down Ami's body, gaze lingering where it wasn't covered by her fuku.

"We also found another flaw," his girlfriend continued, "the golems are wobbly and off-balance when they are asymmetric due to regenerating parts. Fortunately, Mercury should be able to circumvent that problem if she immediately summons them in their final form, despite the embarrassment factor."

Ami ignored her throne, wandered over to the trio and smiled "Hello all. I'm glad to hear that at least some benefit came out of this training session, and I suppose you all want to know why I called you here." With an arcane hand gesture, she made the smoothed surface of the table glow, causing a partial replica of her world map to grow out of the polished stone, showing only the largest continent. A small blue flag with the Mercury symbol in yellow protruded out of the location of her dungeon. Slightly to the east, another flag denoted the country's capital. It was golden, and a caricature of the Baron's angry face was on it. "In short, after considering our options, I have come to the conclusion that waiting here for the Baron to arrive is a losing proposition. Therefore, we are going to war." She heard three audible intakes of breath.

Three red flags, distributed widely over the map, appeared. Each one was adorned by a face reminiscent of a horned reaper. Seeing the wide-eyed expressions of the adventurers, she explained. "I don't know how to make or move dungeon hearts, but we can't stay here for long, as this one will be discovered soon. Thus, I must either claim a new dungeon heart by conquest, or gain the necessary knowledge to create one. The only way to do any of this is by defeating another Keeper." She pointed at the new markers. "These are the approximate locations of Keepers that Jered has identified as being susceptible to subjugation. That is, they are independent and have only a single dungeon heart. Two of them are rumoured to have come into their powers only recently. The one to the west and to the north, to be precise."

"You know, something strikes me as odd," Jered interrupted. "A Keeper's life is linked to his dungeon hearts, and he dies if he loses the last one. So why are there Keepers who don't have spares?"

Ami shrugged her shoulders helplessly. "Unfortunately, I don't know this myself. I can only guess that the process of creating a new one is either difficult, can only be done under certain conditions, or is extremely expensive. In any case, I intend to find out."

"Which means we'll have to take a new one from some Keeper's cold dead fingers. Fine with me," Jered grinned.

"None of these locations are anywhere remotely close to us," Cathy pointed out more pragmatically. "They must be hundreds of miles away! How are we supposed to get there?"

The blue-haired girl turned to face her. "I don't intend for any of you to be anywhere near the fighting," she noted that Snyder let out a sigh of relief, while the blonde's eyes narrowed. "I have been experimenting with the golems, and found out that they are still very much like imps." Exasperatingly so, in fact. Seeing an icy double of herself carrying bricks as if it was a regular imp, all without wearing a stitch of clothing, was an experience that Ami could have done without. "That is, to my Keeper powers they feel like imps, so I can teleport them to neutral territory that I have seen, not only to my own dungeon." Which was an unexpected perk, really. It hadn't been in the design specifications at all, and might be the greatest advantage of these constructs yet.

"That's useful," the blonde whistled appreciatively. "So which one will you attack?"

"Well, from what I have heard, the one to the west is the most weakly defended," Jered offered.

"The west coast is densely settled," Snyder pointed out. "We would be tripping over adventurers if we moved there. It seems like a stupid place for a dungeon unless one plans to wage war upon the surface world."

"Thank you. That's important to know." Ami didn't know how long creating a new dungeon heart would take, and switching from one endangered location to another seemed suboptimal. "What about the other two?"

"Well, the one to the north is somewhere in the mountains, near the Arctic circle. Very cold, sparsely populated area with lots of rich ore veins, or so I've been told. Uses mostly orcs as guards."

"That sounds near-optimal," Cathy said. "Isolated, riches, cold environment for the golems."

Ami was inclined to agree. "What about the last one?"

Jered stroked his wavy hair with his fingers before beginning. "Well, that Keeper used to have a vast territory, but recently, there was some upheaval in the dark pantheon, and the god he worshipped exclusively was destroyed by another. His rivals have made use of the shift in fortune to drive him back to his main fortress. Which, as you can see, is in the middle of the desert. He's probably the most experienced of them all."

"North it is!" Snyder clapped his hands together, looking to the others for support.

Ami nodded slowly, and so did the others. "It does sound like our best option," she agreed, "still, let's ask the others too what they think about this. We might have missed something."

A moment later, the white-haired alchemist, the fat ex-priest, and the haggard black-robed wizard appeared at the opposite end of the table, looking disoriented. "Hi," Ami welcomed them, "please have a look at this map, especially the red flags. Those are the locations of enemy dungeons. Which one do you think would be most suitable for a test run of the golems?"

The three researchers bowed over the map, looking at the terrain and comparing the regions. "That idiot to the north is probably dead already," the old alchemist who looked like a mad professor croaked dismissively, "mountains are crawling with dwarves, and they don't like it when anyone gets close to their precious adamantine. Would love to get my hands on some of that stuff, I would."

"Loathe as I am to agree with my worldly colleague, he does have a point there," the cold voice bubbled up from the dark monk's folds of fat. He looked at the remaining two marked locations. "A fun

exercise, for certain, but not very useful if you are looking for long-term gains. As for the other locations, let's see. I know nothing about the west coast target, but this in the desert should be Keeper Malleus' main fortress. My poor, dear brother in faith, what have you been reduced to," he giggled, "hounded by rivals across the continent and forced to hide out in your last holdout."

"You know that Keeper?" Ami asked, interested.

"Well, of course. I *was* the high priest of his god, you know." The black orbs that were the man's eyes seemed to turn their attention toward the girl in the sailor senshi uniform. "A difficult target, but potentially well worth it. As Malleus' personal abode, it should be full of treasures and secrets, and right now, he is at the weakest he has ever been."

"So what's keeping his rivals from following him and claiming it all for themselves?" Cathy asked the question that had gone through everyone's head.

The fat, rich-robed man laughed again "Enough traps to swallow entire armies whole, that's what. No Keeper has enough manpower to throw into that meatgrinder while still remaining capable of mounting a defence against a counter-attack or against his own rivals."

Ami thought about that. "Except me," she realised after a few seconds.

"Indeed," Tasbaal nodded, the motion of inclining his head turning his double chin into a triple one, "that is, if you are really able to maintain as many ice golems as you have stated, you will be invulnerable to attrition. But even with your affinity for frost magic, the mana cost would be outrageous."

"I can do it," Ami hurried to re-assure him, shrinking a bit under his scrutiny. *He must be overestimating their upkeep,* she thought, *they really are surprisingly efficient.* "Does anyone else have any thoughts on this?" she focused on the third of her new minions expectantly, but the tall warlock just looked as if he'd like to hide behind his beard when her attention turned to him, and he shook his

head in denial.

"Very well then. Thank you for your time. Please get back to work." She inclined her head politely as she dismissed them, transporting them out of the throne room and back into the lab.

"Looks like we dodged an arrow there," Jered commented.

"Yeah, but I'm still worried about the distance," Cathy said while circling the table to consider the map from all sides, "Mercury said she could transport the imps to any neutral place she has seen. I doubt she has ever been to the desert."

Ami smiled. "Don't worry, I have a plan! Snyder, you did finish that ward for the dungeon heart that should prevent my transformation from propagating to unintended recipients, right?"

The redhead nodded, wondering where the young Keeper was going with this.

"Well, I certainly wasn't expecting that," the acolyte said, watching the little imp wearing a sailor fuku and blue goggles over its eyes as it strapped what looked like a huge tablecloth to its back. Ropes connected the corners of the cloth to a harness that the imp was wearing, and there was a little hole cut into its centre.

"So, to summarise, you are going to transport yourself high into the air, where you expect that rag on your back to slow your descent while you take pictures of the surrounding area? And then you move yourself up and to the south-west before you reach the ground, again and again?" Cathy was shaking her head in disbelief.

"It's called a 'parachute'," Ami clarified enthusiastically, "And yes, that's the plan in a nutshell. It will also allow me to update the maps. See you later!" The possessed imp gave a cheerful wave while it squeaked out the reply and then disappeared, presumably to plummet to its death somewhere on the surface.

"She's crazy. Why doesn't she just use her crystal ball?" the blonde asked, arms akimbo.

"Let her have some fun," Jered replied, "besides, she probably doesn't know how to use it."

"I'd be more relaxed if I knew what happened to a Keeper who is possessing something when it dies. Or not, depending on what the answer is," Cathy snapped, walking in a circle nervously.

"I'm sure she's smart enough to get out before that," the brown-haired man tried to re-assure her as he put an arm around her waist. "And Snyder, what are you so happy about?"

"Well, well. My new ward protecting us all from unwanted clothing changes - a challenging and interesting project of astounding complexity indeed - worked without a hitch. That is a reason to be happy, isn't it?"

In the dungeon heart chamber, arcing trails of blue sparkles shot through the air and bounced off the walls, unnoticed by any observers.

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Inhuman Waves

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"Eeeee!" an imp darted into the room, its feet screeching over the floor tiles as it tried to come to a stop from a full out sprint. The little brownish-green creature waved its arms to keep its balance, an effort that proved futile when it skidded onward and collided with Cathy's legs. With an annoyed squeal, it tilted its head and looked up at the blonde with huge black eyes.

The startled swordswoman felt a passing urge to kick the excited little thing when she realised that it was sitting in the perfect position to look up her much-too-short skirt. As if feeling the impending danger, the imp jumped to its feet and started hopping up and down in front of the blonde, gesticulating with its three-fingered hands, and chattering away with a quick cadence.

"I don't understand a word you are saying," the adventuress said, "can't it wait until the Keeper gets back?"

In response, the imp stomped on her blue boot with all its weight before leaping again, snatching her hand and pulling toward the exit. Its little feet were kicking up dust as it futilely struggled to pull along the much larger woman.

"I think it wants you to come along," Snyder guessed.

"Why, I would have never figured *that* out," Cathy replied. "Oh well, let's see what has it so up in arms." She moved to follow the small minion, jogging easily alongside it. Snyder and Jered followed her out of curiosity.

The sounds of their footsteps echoed through the dungeon's bright white and aquamarine corridors. Naturally, people running drew attention, and soon the trio and the imp had picked up a trail of bored goblins who didn't know what the fuss was all about, but who wanted in on the action anyway. After a short rush through the tunnels, which were stabilised by stone arches resting on thick

pillars, the group came to a stop in a little used, but still familiar corner of the dungeon. A tray with untouched food sat forgotten at the edge of a pit, but it went ignored in favour of the bent bars over the hole in the ground.

"Damn it all, no!" Cathy ran up to the edge of the pit and stared down in dismay. As expected, there was no trace of Boris. "Argh! Raise the alarm! We must find him before he does something stupid! You, goblins! Go there! You others, that tunnel! You, the chicken farm! On the double!"

The green creatures hastily obeyed and got out of her sight, while she turned to her smarter companions and paced up and down. "I don't believe it! How could he get out?"

"Well, it appears to me that there was a certain amount of slime involved. Now, I may not be an expert in dungeon fauna, but I do think there is only one creature within these vaults which has that property," Snyder ventured after kneeling down and examining the glistening residue on the metal bars.

"What does the tentacle monster want with him?" Jered wondered. "No, don't answer that, I certainly don't need to know. Let's just find them before something unfortunate happens."

High in the air, the wind was refreshingly cool despite the endless-seeming expanse of yellow dunes far below. Ami felt herself sink lower, her light imp body carried easily by the makeshift parachute. On the ground, she could see her shadow as a black dot moving over the windswept sands. This expedition was actually a lot of fun, she thought, and continued to analyse and record the landscape through her goggles. The one thing tainting her enjoyment of the experience was the escort she had picked up. A handful of scruffy vultures was circling her. From time to time, one of the more adventurous of the birds concluded that he didn't like waiting for his meal and dived at her, which necessitated a quick teleport to relocate, after which it took the animals a short while to catch up again. It was more of a nuisance than a danger, but it disrupted her routine. A quick spell would probably have gotten rid of them, but

she didn't know from how far away the enemy Keeper could pick them up, and she didn't want to give him an early warning unnecessarily.

During the last few jumps, the desert below had been gradually changing, so slowly she had not even been consciously aware of it. The rich ochre tones of the sand had turned into pale faded greys, and the occasional cactuses were gnarled, corkscrewing things with barbed thorns. The dust on the surface was in constant motion, hovering in the air like a fog cloud, forming swirling eddies and whirlpools over the heat-flickering surface. This had to be the corrupting influence of the enemy dungeon heart. Finding her target should be easy now! She looked around to find the borders of the tainted lands. The expanse of ashen dunes stretched to the horizon in every direction except the one she had arrived from. The imp-body scratched its head. This might take a bit longer than she thought.

"I feel so violated."

"Cease your yammering, wretched hellspawn!" Boris whispered angrily. The huge man was tiptoeing onwards into the direction of the slow but regular heartbeats vibrating through the underground. His looming form was wrapped entirely with green tentacles, some of which looked as if they were trying desperately to wriggle out of the main mass.

"You know that I'm not really going to hide you from her sight, do you? Oh, and watch out for that trap, I don't want you to land on me again," the mind-voice whined.

"Shut up unless I ask for directions!", the barbarian hissed back.

"But- No! Not the beard again! I've still got hair in- Gack!"

With his slithering coat suitably subdued, Boris ducked into a side passage when he heard the pitter-patter of rapidly moving feet. From far away, he heard orders being barked by a female voice he knew well. Cathy, that traitor-bitch, was coordinating the search for

him. How deep she and her companions had fallen, but they would get their just reward. The main fault, of course, lay with that witch of a Keeper who had engineered this entire situation in order to spread corruption. But he'd stop her, oh yes he would! The blasphemous rumbling of the dungeon heart was close, and with his cunning disguise, he'd be upon it before that thrice-cursed demon witch would know what was going on. His grip tightened around the haft of the spear he had liberated from a goblin den close to his escape route.

"This is an extremely unwise course of action! The Keeper said the traps in the Heart Chamber are indiscriminate! Ow! Not the eye!"

"I'm not afraid of more pits!" Not heading the warning, the large barbarian moved on, listening for any approaching guards. The task was made more difficult by the loud beating of the dungeon heart which had to be somewhere very close. It was only a matter of time before his pursuers deduced his destination, and he was in a hurry. Quickly, he ascended the slope of a tunnel that was narrower than the previous ones. A heavy portcullis, completely solid rather than just consisting of grating, blocked his route.

"Turn back now! I have no idea what's behind that gate!

Boris snorted in annoyance as he once again failed to heed the panicked advice. He wasn't going to be stopped by a glorified door, not when he was so close to his target! He jabbed the head of his spear into the small gap between the door and the ground, using the weapon as a lever. Once he could fit his fingers underneath the widening opening, he did just that. His arm muscles bulged as he started lifting the heavy weight with a grunt, and slowly but certainly, the massive rock slab budged upward, sliding into the ceiling with a grinding noise. The knotted tentacles of the monster wrapped around the giant's torso started twitching in a frenzy as their owner tried to get loose. In contrast with its wearer, it hadn't missed the brightening azure glare spilling out from the widening horizontal slit, and let out a telepathic whimper.

Something glittery and blue shot out from the opening when Boris had lifted the portcullis to the height of his knees, bounced off the ground between his boots with a pinging noise, and shot off

diagonally toward the ceiling. For no readily apparent reason, the trail of sparkles then turned around and headed straight for the large man's back.

Several large red dots flashed on Ami's map, denoting knots of evil energy that she had been able to locate underneath the grey sands. Streamers of animated dust wafted over the dunes like smoke, and a strong soot smell permeated the air. Now that Ami's parachute was sinking lower, she saw that the sky seemingly changed colour when seen through the contaminated air which acted like a stained glass window. Instead of blue sky, the tones above turned greenish, and the clouds appeared in a poisonous yellow colour. Charming.

A jolt went through the legs of her imp body as she landed in the fine sand. Her feet sank deeply into the yielding substance, and she nearly yelped when the heat stored in the sun-scorched surface seared her like a hot plate. She scrambled to get the cloth of her parachute between herself and the ground, and considered her best plan of attack. Keeper Malleus' underground complex was extensive, from what the energy readings told her. Minor tunnels extended for kilometres, as far as she could tell from up here. From the vibrations of the ground, her computer had calculated the presence of at least ten distant beating dungeon hearts, a number that was completely inconsistent with the amount of dark power flowing through the area. Fakes to lure more enemies into the prepared traps, perhaps? With a sigh, she closed the palmtop. She couldn't get any clear information from up here. There didn't seem to be any entrance into the complex from above, which explained why the terrain she was standing on felt unclaimed. Taking possession of an area required a continuous path of claimed territory to the dungeon heart, at least in the first phase, and without exits, this was not possible.

She'd have to make her own entrance, then. Hopefully, this meant that she would be bypassing most of the enemy's network of traps, which was most likely positioned to fend off a subterranean attack. Still, she didn't think that what had apparently been an experienced Keeper would leave himself completely open to such an obvious avenue of attack. In any case, she'd need more workers to dig her

way down into the enemy stronghold. With a by now familiar mental exertion, she grabbed an imp from her dungeon and brought it to her side - at least that was her intention. She could feel the imp de-materialise and shoot toward her, but the further away it got from her dungeon heart, the more a resistance started to build, as if the creature was affixed to a rubber band. After a distance of about sixty kilometres, the being in transit slipped from her grasp, similar to what had happened to the beetle she had once tried to move past the border of her dungeon's territory. The difference here was that the imp had been travelling a lot faster, and she sensed it expire almost immediately after she lost hold of it. What the...?

The body Ami was possessing was well-suited to staring in bemused bewilderment. There was a range limit on her transportation powers? Since when? She had already teleported creatures further than that when she had been in Arachne's dungeon! What had been different then? She briefly entertained the notion that Malleus' presence was interfering, but dismissed that idea. The imp had come from her own dungeon, which wasn't anywhere close to him. Besides, she hadn't had any trouble transporting herself. Then again, she had only been making short hops of a few kilometres. Hmm. Further tests were required, but in a safer location. With a thought, she disappeared from the patch of blighted land. Landscapes blinked past her in quick succession as she went through a sequence of rapid relocations, until she reappeared on a green meadow that she had surveyed from above during her journey. It was an oasis of wilderness close to the edge of the desert.

Ami concentrated for a brief moment, muttering an incantation. With a plopping sound, an imp coalesced from pure, greenish mana, and somersaulted to the ground. Good. The imp creation spell still worked. She tried moving the creature just a step to the right. The minor teleportation went with its usual smoothness. She tried again, this time over several kilometres. She could feel the same kind of resistance build up as before, but her connection did not snap, and the minion arrived safely. The hop had been shorter than what she had attempted before. Maybe it was related to the distance of the movement? She tried again, flinging the imp further away from her in, the same direction as before. The resistance became stronger

and stronger. Ami nodded to herself. So distance travelled didn't figure into it, only distance from her or from the dungeon heart. When she had been underneath the capital, the two safe radii must have partly overlapped, extending the range of teleportation to nearly twice its usual limit.

With the mystery explained to her satisfaction, Ami started working on a way to get past this inconvenience. If she counted as the anchor, could she simply possess a creature and 'follow' along to get past the limitation? She looked down at her borrowed body. Only one way to find out. Taking a deep breath, she launched herself straight upwards.

"AAaaaAhhhHHHhhh!" The skin of her imp-cheeks fluttered in the wind and tried to crawl to the back of her skull, and the airflow stung in her eyes as the world spun like a top around her. Had she been capable of a coherent thought aside from *"Eject! Eject!"* it would probably have been along the lines of 'Darn it!' at the failure of this workaround.

"I hate you so much!" The mental voice of the tentacle monster was dripping with venom. The creature had just been subjected to sparkles, random spinning in different directions, heaps and heaps of ribbons, bands of cloth forming along its appendages before falling off because they didn't fit, all while similar things happened to the barbarian it was wrapped around. Oh, and to add injury to insult, the heavy portcullis had dropped down during the chaos, pinning three of its sensitive tentacles with its weight. For once, the outburst didn't result in immediate violence from Boris's side. Either the brute was pinned down by the mountain of white and blue uniforms filling part of the tunnel, or, more likely, he was too busy emptying his stomach. To make matters worse, voices and rapid footsteps were approaching.

"...came from there!"

"That's the way to the Heart Chamber! How could he have gotten there so fast?" the voice belonged to that other traitor, Jered, Boris thought, feeling the onset of a familiar rage. Well, so be it. They

wouldn't take him without a fight. With a mighty heave, he shook off the garments weighing on his back, erupting from the pile like a Jack-In-the-Box. His roar of fury took on a surprised higher pitch toward the end when he felt himself pulled down by his left shoulder, and slammed with his back against the closed gate. He glared at his arm, which was covered in pulsating green appendages. "Cease your interference, wretched thing!"

"I didn't do anything! You pulled on me, you dolt! Let go already!"

"There he is! Boris, give up!" Cathy rounded the corner, with Jered and Snyder not far behind her. Huffing and puffing loudly, the white-haired alchemist appeared a moment later.

Boris was not in the right frame of mind to cooperate. He lifted his right arm to pull off the monster holding on to his left shoulder, but stopped half-way through the motion. Something felt off. The onlookers let out a gasp as the limb appeared out of the mound of uniforms that the giant was standing in. The exclamation from the Alchemist sounded more like "Dibs!" though.

Starting from the elbow, the barbarian's arm bore no resemblance to a human one. Tanned skin turned to slimy green, and the appendage divided into a set of four long tentacles that coiled and glistened like snakes. The brute turned his head, looking at his shoulder again, and his perception shifted. That was not his arm covered in the creature's pseudopods, that was the thing's body growing out of his shoulder! It was at this point that he started gibbering into his beard.

"I told you so! This is all your fault! Also, that explains how I ended up with this!" A hand like a shovel emerged from the scattered fukus on the ground, rising on three winding stalks. It twitched before slowly balling into a fist. Moments later, it shot forward as if the tendrils it was attached to were uncoiling springs, and smacked right into the unresisting barbarian's face, punching him out.

"Ouch! This isn't fair! I finally get to hit someone, and I feel it too!"

Cathy looked nauseous. "That's what Mercury meant by indiscriminate traps? I hadn't expected something quite as strange."

"Certainly an interesting use of denatured magic," a cold voice from behind her commented. The round bulk of Tasbaal waddled down the corridor, too dignified to do something as demeaning as *running*. "Analysing this subject will certainly be an interesting research project. Get it to my lab!"

A pillar of black speared down from above onto an unsuspecting imp, making it wobble on its feet. A moment later, a shape devoid of light shot from its forehead, quickly growing in size and solidifying into Ami. The girl wobbled unsteadily from one leg to the other, steadying herself against the wall. She was so woozy that her own dungeon seemed to spin around her, and thus she was glad when she made it to her room, where she could flop down on her bed. She closed her eyes and adjusted her battle plan in light of the new information. The first implication was that she wouldn't be able to bring in her trained golems from here, and would have to create new ones as required directly at the battlefield. This wasn't a huge problem. However, it meant that she would lose an engagement if the opponent managed to destroy all the local minions she could inhabit. She could just possess another imp and move it back to the combat site within a span of ten minutes or so, but the trip back home to the dungeon in the first place took a lot longer. The shadowy form she shifted into before seeping into a new body seemed to require actual travel, and she had been aware of landscape zooming past for what felt like hours on the way back. Long enough for a Keeper to heal up his minions, repair the traps, and plug any holes, certainly. Not to mention the fact that she was operating on a time limit. She had better get up and try again.

Before she departed to start the attack for real, she should drop in to inform the others of her progress. She had been away for longer than expected, after all. She transported herself to the adventurers, who were all conveniently congregating in the same area. Strangely enough, even her new hirelings were with them. "Hello all, I'm back. The scouting mission was successful and- WHAT IS THAT?"

Her short blue hair seemed to stand on end as she spotted the grotesque tentacle-covered monstrosity strapped to a table. The various denizens milling about it looked up and turned around,

startled at her sudden arrival and outburst.

"It seems that this intruder ran afoul of one of your traps, Keeper. A commendably twisted effort," the monk with eyes of solid black informed and congratulated her.

"B-but I never installed anything like that!"

The large humanoid mound of tentacles and eyes on the table twitched in sudden anger. Did it have three hands? "You damn witch! COME HERE SO I CAN WRING YOUR NECK!" the abomination howled from two mouths at once, producing an odd, overlapping tone.

"Oh yes, go ahead and antagonise the Keeper more. Moron."

"Is that Boris?" Ami stared, visor already on her eyes as she approached the restrained figure cautiously.

"Yes, and it seems your tentacle monster is in there too," Cathy said, looking queasy. "We found them near the heart chamber, covered in a large heap of your uniforms. They have been slowly changing shape ever since. Can you undo it?" her voice became more demanding.

The young Keeper took a step back at the intensity of the gaze. "Sorry, I don't even know what could have caused that! There wasn't a single magical trap in the room!" Poor Boris. He might be annoying, but he wasn't really evil. She hoped she wasn't responsible for this.

The protest raised an eyebrow from the alchemist. "Are you saying your dungeon heart is leaking wild magic on its own? That is... unsafe, to say the least."

Ami gave the old man, who routinely carried within his chest pocket several fragile vials of chemicals that would result in a violent explosion when mixed, a wary glance. "It certainly didn't when I last checked on it. Wait, you mentioned uniforms?" her head turned to focus on the redhead in the room, eyes narrowing. "Snyder, could this have something to do with the ward I asked you to install?"

The acolyte swallowed as all eyes turned on him. "Well, there might be a tiny, hypothetical possibility that the grounding of the re-directed magic might not have been one-hundred percent effective. However, it was a complicated project that would typically require fully trained-"

"So yes," Cathy interrupted the answer that was about to degenerate into a string of excuses. "I remain unsurprised by your skills."

"Be that as it may," Ami held up her hands before an argument could break out, "I want all of you to search for a way to stop and possibly revert the mutation. I'm sorry to leave you like this, Boris, but I have an attack on another Keeper to execute, which really can't wait. I hope you'll be better soon! Oh, and until further notice, nobody enter the Heart Chamber again. I might need to do things that will cause another magic build-up!"

Given that there wasn't much that the people back at the dungeon could do to support the assault, their pre-battle briefing had been short and had consisted mainly of a map update. With that out of the way, Ami soon found herself back in the choking heat of Malleus' ash-coloured desert. She had tried to leave a few imps on her route as anchors that she could return to should she be defeated, but found that her connection with them just faded out when she got too far away. She truly had to succeed in one go.

With that thought firmly in mind, the senshi went to work. She was currently in one of the golem bodies, which was a strange and also familiar feeling at the same time. Due to its great resemblance to herself, she had no trouble moving the body, but there were some distracting differences, for example the lack of pain receptors, or the utter quiet when she was standing still. She hadn't ever realised how much background noise a fleshy body's normal operation caused until it was gone. Her modesty was protected by a suit of chain mail that glittered in the sunlight. Being made of interconnected rigid parts, it could be fashioned from ice and wouldn't be destroyed simply by the golem moving around. She had little doubt that it would be gone soon once combat started, but it was better than

sending the animated facsimiles of herself into battle completely naked. Ami planted her feet into the hot, grey dust with determination, feeling a prickling sensation as more magic seeped to her soles in order to stop them from melting. "Mercury Power, Make Up! Shabon Spray!"

A cloud of chilly fog spread out to challenge the dominance of the swirling dust and blanketing out the sun. Immediately, the surrounding temperatures dropped dramatically. Ami didn't know whether she already had the attention of the enemy Keeper, but she didn't wait to find out. With a few quick incantations, balls of blue water shot from her fingers, one after another, and grew into glittering, transparent replicas of herself, dressed in icy mail. She herself was, of course, back in her unif- wait a minute! Why hadn't it formed? The transformation had banished her armour, but failed to summon her fuku? This had to be Snyder's fault, somehow! Ami would have blushed if her current body had been capable of the action. Alas, without the prerequisite blood vessels, she was reduced to just feeling embarrassed. She shook her head, putting the issue aside. She had more important things to do, and besides, she had already resigned herself to the fact that she'd end up leading the assault in what looked like a naked, transparent version of herself at some point. At least, without the fuku, consisting of smooth ice made her harder to spot in this fog. Maybe too hard to make out any details, she tried to cheer herself up.

Her minions were already scattering in different directions so a potential surprise attack couldn't get all of them, and Ami switched to creating new imps and setting them to dig a tunnel down. At this point, the first difficulty reared its ugly head. The sand was much too fine and loose and immediately slid into any opened hole, filling it in. Trying to dig down from above without some sort of large, dedicated equipment would be futile, Ami understood. So this was why Malleus felt that he could neglect the surface: it defended itself on its own just fine. Well, unless the opponent could do this: "Shabon Spray Freezing!"

Sailor Mercury assisted her imps by freezing the sand that was giving way, stabilising the sides of the shaft with a wall of ice. Under their combined efforts, the tunnel grew, going down deeper and

deeper. The sand reached depths that Ami considered unlikely to occur naturally. Maybe Malleus had filled in some previously existing crater? The creaks of the ice above as it strained against the pressure were less than reassuring, and she quickly send more spells upward, filling the shaft with a solid core that held the sand back. She just hoped it wouldn't come crashing down on her and her workforce at some point. Being in this tunnel was much like being in a deep, dark well, and if she had suffered from claustrophobia, she would have been unable to function. Finally, the picks of her imps struck rock with loud, metallic clangs, and she could take a break from freezing the walls. Progress now became much smoother, if not faster. At least, she was now able to split up her forces again, with there being no need for her to keep the tunnels from collapsing personally. Four of her imps started to dig diagonally downwards in a cross spread while Ami scanned the underground.

At first, the pattern of glowing lines appearing on her visor didn't seem to make any sense, but a few quick keystrokes on the Mercury computer helped sort out the random noise from the flows of evil energy that permeated Malleus' underground tunnels. Little by little, the picture became clearer, showing that the main bulk of the Keeper's complex was still lower and had a nearly cube-shaped layout. Myriads of loosely collected hallways spiralled around the central complex, which contained large halls and open spaces. She thought that when unwound and lined up in a row, the total length of the tunnel network would exceed a hundred kilometres. In their current arrangement, they formed an impenetrable labyrinth, bound to confuse any intruders.

Before Ami could start plotting the best course to her destination, she had to find out where exactly the destination was. Thirteen angry red dots, labelled by her computer as 'dungeon heart', blinked on the screen. Despite her best efforts, she was unable to tell the real one from the convincing fakes through all the obstructions. She needed more data, and she could only get it by forcing her way into the enemy fortress and taking it! Without further ado, she ordered one of the imps to set a course toward the closest target, and had the other three continue to spread their tunnels into different directions. Then, she created an escort of nine golems, distributing the other ones on the surface or positioning them with the other

diggers.

The clanging of her miner's pick took on a different note when it struck the wall of enchanted stone isolating Malleus' dungeon from its surroundings. The imp's progress slowed to a crawl as the magic in its pick was neutralised and it had to chip the rock away the hard way. Within the dungeon, she could hear shrill noises as alarms sounded. Now, Malleus was definitely aware of her presence. She ordered her other golems to help the imp, pushing against the blocks forming the wall. After what felt like an eternity, the obstruction crumbled inward, rumbling to the floor. Ami's troops darted forward over the debris, limbs of ice making grinding sounds as they moved. Preceded by an impenetrable cloud of fog, her army surged into the corridor.

There were no enemies in sight, but Ami's minions had barely taken a few steps when long blades scythed out of the ground and chopped through legs and torsos. Water splashed and ice broke, and several of her golems dropped from the sudden attack. Startled, Ami took a step back. Fortunately, none of her minions were down for the count, even if some were shrinking a lot. She could see shattered hollow arms and legs melting on the floor. Treading more carefully, she stepped through the corridor after her underlings had bent the traps into uselessness with vicious kicks. Shiiiing! Ami suddenly experienced the disconcerting feeling of being pinned to the floor by a large spike through the back of her skull when a portcullis came down on her. There was no pain, only the horrid realisation that she'd be dead if this was her real body, and a disturbing feeling of leaking. The fact that the trap had let some of her underlings pass and waited for her specifically meant that the Keeper must have identified her as the most important enemy already. Metal squealed as the golems used their hydraulically enhanced strength to lift the portcullis off of her. She sat up, just in time to be blown into smithereens by three cannons popping out of the ground a bit further ahead. Disoriented, her shadowy form screeched out of the mess of ice and water and shot toward the nearest spare body, while the disembodied laugh of Malleus echoed through the halls. She was starting to see why no sane Keeper would have his army put one foot into that maze.

His laugh only stopped when a new wave of slender, scantily clad ice figures burst in through the opening, with the lead one freezing the gun turrets before they could fire. The attack team continued onward, smashing any traps to bits that they came across. Most of them were more of a nuisance than any real threat to the golems' unique physiology, but they slowed progress down, and from time to time, the group lost a member for good. Ami refrained from re-casting the golem spell within the Keeper's territory, as she didn't want to tip him off to the fact that the only way to win was to eliminate all of her units on the battlefield. Right now, he must have been frantically searching for her own dungeon to strike back at- a trapdoor opened under her, and she could see the red glow of the lava at the bottom of the pit shine through her clear body. Well, that was a novel way to go, she reflected while she fell, feeling a bit like the coyote from these Western cartoons.

Once again in a spare body, Ami spotted something she had been waiting for: enemy movement. Malleus was dropping imps into her freshly dug-out passages, searching for the source of the near-endless intrusions. With a smile on her sparkling features, the statue-girl went to work, scanning the incoming transportation events. Now that she knew that there was a relation between dungeon heart and Keeper proximity and ease of movement, she could observe minuscule differences in the patterns. Deploying a few of her soldiers to chase off the enemy imps - it wouldn't do if they claimed her territory, she couldn't move her troops there - she continued with her calculations. The fact that both the Keeper and the real heart were in the same area was complicating things. However, as one of the two solutions of her equations didn't correspond to a heart location, the result was solid. "Got it!" Ami shouted happily with a voice like glass. She deployed two teams of cannon fodder to renew their assault through the breach. Meanwhile, her imps were digging toward the real dungeon heart until they ran out of rock and were forced to once again break into the enemy dungeon.

What followed was a long and arduous battle as Malleus threw everything he had at the intruders. In between being blown up, flattened by enormous rolling rocks, buried under cave-ins, turned into a chicken, impaled, bisected, shot, stabbed, electrified, and

crushed between closing walls, Ami had little time to marvel at the sheer opulence of the enemy dungeon. The colours were predominantly silver and amethyst, and statues (bows fully functional), tapestries (hiding swinging axe blades), and expensive furniture (full of poison gas) were everywhere she looked. The light came from glowing crystals set into magnificent chandeliers (which tried to crush her), rather than normal candles. Everywhere, the crafts were of finest gold and marble, and had intricate carvings, such as that fireplace (with hidden flamethrower) over there.

The real problem were the enemy troops. Despite the fog, her creations just tended to get smashed, clobbered, and reduced to ice water if they didn't outnumber the enemy at least three to one. Ahead of her, a massive red bile demon had grabbed one of the artificial girls by the ankle and was swinging her around like a club, smashing her against the wall. She burst into shards of ice and released a flood of water. Sure, Ami's own presence helped to even the odds, but she was beginning to feel that she wasn't as immune to attrition as she had thought. She ducked under a swing of a troll's hammer that smashed a fragile marble pillar, making a film of white dust stick to her bared curves. The green creature's eyes went wide in surprise, which she took as an opportunity to punch it in the face and take it out of the battle. Oh, she wasn't running out of power or anything like that, but she was getting tired. It was a mental fatigue, the sort that had nothing to do with physical exertion. Nevertheless, it was real and impairing her ability to channel magic and create new troops. Even maintaining possession of a body was becoming a chore, and twice already, she had nearly slipped and returned to her real body, which could very well be fatal under present circumstances.

The golem wave tactics were too draining, and she had to resort to fighting smarter, not harder. A large boulder rolling down the corridor met a hastily conjured ice ramp, and suddenly it was the enemy troops following behind it who were fleeing, not her golems. A bit further ahead, a group of monsters spotted ice soldier after ice soldier walk past a fog-filled fork in the corridor for minutes, marching in silent unison. They decided that discretion was the better part of valour, which was good, as their large number would have easily wiped out Ami's small team that was walking in a circle,

passing again and again past the same opening. Finally, after tricking and fighting her way past a large amount of guards and traps, Ami arrived in a huge chamber with her nine remaining golems. In the centre of the circular hall stood a golden step pyramid, and on its top, the dungeon heart of Keeper Malleus was beating rapidly. Within its superstructure, a pinprick of mana glowed brighter and brighter until its green light filled the cavern like a miniature sun. When the glare receded, the cavern was full of creatures.

Rows upon rows of trolls and larger, red-skinned humanoids formed the front ranks, but Ami could also spot what had to be warlocks behind them. At least twenty of the bloated red demons with morning stars dangling from their long, horizontal horns formed the front row. A huge winged lizard - no, that had to be a young dragon, about twice as tall as a grown man - was skulking around the base of the pyramid, and on its steps, a dozen albino archers were grabbing poisoned arrows for their bows. Ami gulped. There had to be over a hundred enemies within the cavern, without counting the Keeper himself.

"Hear me, my minions! Defend the dungeon heart at all costs! The portal is gone, and my end will be yours! Now destroy the intruders!" Malleus' voice sounded calm, but the inflection had been off at certain words, most notably 'end', which revealed his false façade for what it was. He was scared and desperate, gambling all on one card. Too bad that would be enough to defeat her if she didn't do something soon. Besides, she needed him alive.

"Creatures of Malleus, listen to me!" Ami demanded as she stepped forward with flashing red eyes, drawing all gazes. It certainly helped that her icy ring mail had not survived the preceding violence.

"Nothing in this dungeon has managed to even slow me down yet. Not your traps, not your Keeper's spells, and certainly not you! OBSERVE!" the ice girl raised her left hand, and a new golem sprang from it. She repeated the motion with her right hand. The two new minions took flanking positions next to her.

A murmur went through the crowd, even as Ami desperately tried to hide how much these last two spells had taken out of her. Having an

entirely transparent expression seemed to be useful for bluffing, though, especially at a distance.

"You see? My casualties are meaningless. Cut one of my creations down, and I will just replace it with another! But if you die, you are gone! I had already won the moment I decided to take this dungeon, and all you can do is flee or fall." She spread her arms. "But sadly, it seems that your Keeper, in his *wisdom*, has taken the former option from you. However, I am not without mercy. If you want to live, convince Malleus to surrender to me and to become my follower!"

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Desperation Move

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Ami was smart, but she had delivered her ultimatum with all the oratory talent of a shy Japanese schoolgirl. Her body, being that of a slender naked ice statue, did nothing to increase the intimidation factor.

"Don't worry about her, worry about what I'll do to you if I catch you not following my orders!" Malleus roared, and his minions shrunk back and shuffled their feet nervously on the marble floor. "What do you take me for, an easily cowed novice? I know very well that there is no way you can maintain more than a limited number of those things! Troops, capture, rather than kill them! Mutilate them first if that's what it takes!"

A few of the bile demons were already moving toward Ami's group, fatty red folds wobbling in concert with the gleaming morningstars hanging from their horns. Less than a third of the underlings were advancing on Ami's icy dozen in a wave of red, consisting for the most part of the near-spherical bile demons and crimson-skinned orcs. The heavy warhammers the latter were wielding looked particularly troublesome to the increasingly desperate girl. She also saw that the main mass of the enemy Keeper's minions was still undecided, while the warlocks and other more intelligent ones were edging furtively toward the exits. A rain of arrows unleashed by the albino archers shot toward Ami, and she instinctively held up her hand and flinched away, but the poisoned barbs just pinged uselessly off her glittering skin.

Slaps echoed through the large hall, and trolls reeled as the Keeper smacked them around, using his invisible hold on them to whip them into action. For the cowards, he had a special treat. "Thinking about being dead weight? Then do it *properly*!"

Ami deciphered his meaning a moment before those whom it concerned found out, and her team of transparent golems was

already scattering when the first hapless underlings appeared above and started to rain down on her group. Looking up to the ceiling to watch out for plummeting monsters while keeping the advancing wave of enemies in sight proved difficult, and she had her forces retreat into the hallway she had come from. It was away from her target, but had to be better than facing the horde in the open and getting surrounded, and the traps were already neutralised. Someone trying to capture her golems so she couldn't make new ones hadn't even crossed her mind yet! She staggered over the body of a wizard who had flopped to the ground in front of her and waved her arms to keep her balance, stepping on his stomach for the same reason. While the man let out a pained groan, one of her companions ran into a troll, who had just fallen into her path, and bowled him over. Both went down in a tangled heap. Malleus, finding his tactic sufficiently successful, intensified the bombardment, and Ami could barely move a step without tripping or having to swerve around a suddenly appearing obstacle as more and more creatures fell from the ceiling like raindrops. Worse, some of the more loyal creatures had been dropped further ahead in the corridor, and the fat demons were getting up and blocking the retreat route.

The richly-decorated hallway was more and more resembling the interior of a cramped train, except that the other passengers were monstrous, bad-tempered, and actively obstructing any progress. In such an environment, the golems were inevitably grabbed or slammed to the ground one after the other, and Malleus gleefully kept throwing more minions onto the pile. Burrowed under the hostile masses, Ami found to her surprise that her opponent's excessive malice had led him to commit something of a tactical blunder. She and her soldiers were made of ice and difficult to grapple under the best of circumstances, and close-in fighting played to her golems' strengths, literally. Frozen hands closed around necks and exerted pressure that nobody would have thought these delicate fingers capable of, resulting in sickening crunches and snapping sounds. The intelligences animating the statues were not picky about what they grabbed, and leathery green bellies were squeezed open as easily as pinkish arms were pinched off. Slick with blood, the ice constructs were even harder to get a hold on, and often just shot out of a strong grip.

The hostile creatures within the pile, having the misfortune of being the smartest of the bunch, immediately realised that being snuggled in the lethal embrace of the attractive enemy minions was something to be avoided at all costs, and they pushed against their neighbours, stubby legs and clawed feet attempting to propel their owners away from the danger. The pressure of monsters struggling to move into opposite directions with no space for anyone to go clogged up traffic in the area and stopped them from coordinating, which would have allowed them to take down their slippery targets with a few well-aimed swings. Despite the chaos, a few enemies got lucky, and Ami heard the tinkling of breaking ice as one of her minions shattered. She could see another being dragged away spread-eagled between four orcs, the pointy business end of a warhammer anchored within each limb. Ami tried to send the captive to the surface, but to her horror, her Keeper grip just slid powerlessly over the immobilised form. Once again, her ignorance about the basic rules governing her new powers threatened to destroy her plans at the worst possible time.

The melee continued, and with nobody having his full range of movement, her fighters were causing a bloodbath. Out of the corner of an eye, she saw one of the tough and resilient bile demons die when one of her golems ripped open the skin covering the protective layers of fat, shoved her fragile-looking arm into the wound up to the elbow, and fired her finger-projectiles. It was a good thing that Ami didn't have a stomach that could turn right now. A knee coming down on her eye obstructed her view of the grisly sight. Another golem fractured somewhere out of her sight, diluting the mixture of blood and water on the ground. She was inflicting casualties, but couldn't take this attrition rate. If she wanted to turn this battle around somehow, she needed time to regroup and reassess her options. A large metal boot entered her field of vision, becoming larger and larger at a rapid rate, reinforcing her decision.

Ami ripped herself and her soldiers through space, trading ground for not suffering more irreplaceable casualties. Improbable victory later was better than certain defeat right now, but things didn't look good, she worried. She and six of her soldiers appeared in the narrow tunnel leading toward the second breach. If she counted herself, that left her with nine golems to work with, two of which were

on duty chasing off enemy imps. She was still feeling mentally exhausted as she surveyed her troops, all of which had a coating of dark red clinging to their curvy forms. The ones who had taken the most damage were notably smaller than their companions, and all had lost their armour early in the battle.

The senshi possessing one of the ice bodies clenched her fists as she re-assessed the situation. She was so tired she was only good for a few more spells. On the positive side, a path to the enemy dungeon heart had been cleared of traps, eliminating that danger, she also knew the route to get there, and the Keeper seemed to lack the power to throw offensive spells. At least he hadn't used any of those yet. On the negative side, she was more or less out of reinforcements, her opponent was alert and aware of how to defeat her, outnumbered her with higher-quality troops, had his one weakness well-defended now, and seemed unwilling to submit. What were her options? Retreating and admitting defeat would not gain her anything, but she would not necessarily lose a lot except time from it. There were still two more Keepers that she could try to subjugate. Then again, she didn't know how long it would take Malleus to re-build his portal and spread the news, or for her to fully recover from the exertion of casting so many spells. She must have already lost more ice golems to the automated defences than Malleus had total creatures. She would only retreat once she was down to her last unit, Ami decided. She couldn't risk being stuck as a fleeting shadow for hours again while she travelled home.

She consulted her computer once more, re-calculating Malleus' position. He hadn't moved yet, so she felt confident that he wouldn't unless something forced him to. A single golem sneaking in and assassinating him while the rest held his attention elsewhere would allow her to claim his dungeon heart for herself, which would at least provide a sanctuary from the Baron's forces. However, this meant that the intruder had to get past an unknown number of traps all while remaining undetected, as the slightest hint of danger would cause the target to teleport away. In addition, she'd have to make it physically to the now unclaimed heart before any other ambitious denizen of the dungeon did. Which pretty much required her to fight her way through his troops so she could be at the heart the moment he died. Which led her to her last option: reach the heart and hold it

hostage so Malleus *had* to cooperate. Easier said than done, but still more achievable than the assassination option. She'd have to reach the heart in both cases, except in the former one she'd be attempting to do it one golem down, with less of a potential pay-off.

Ami nodded to herself as she closed her palmtop, making the device disappear back into its subspace pocket. Reaching the dungeon heart was the most beneficial option, in addition to being the easiest one. Where 'easy' meant 'near-impossible' in the current situation, she pondered anxiously. But if her troops were no longer replaceable, she should make the most of the ones she had. Maybe she could upgrade them all with the senshi transformation? It had worked wonders for Cathy, and the initial golem body she had taken into combat had felt more powerful than the current ones. She should at least give it a try. With any luck, transforming wouldn't tire her out as much as casting another golem creation spell. Blurting out her transformation phrase resulted in the familiar feeling of her transformation sequence that looked like a short flash of blue light to any observers. She possessed the largest of the remaining golems, repeating the procedure. The strain was bearable so far. She did it again, twice, bringing the number of pseudo-senshi up to four. However, this time something went definitely wrong. She could feel the combined power requirements of maintaining the golems and the transformation burn through her reserves at an alarming rate. Suddenly, the pool of mana stored within her dungeon heart was empty. The two smallest golems became inert ice statues surrounded by a fading halo of green sparkles as their enchantment gave out.

The drain on the young Keeper's reserves now maintained balance with the influx of fresh power, and she felt that her dungeon heart was neither filling or emptying. Ami turned to look at the three still untransformed statues. They would not make much of a difference in the coming battle, so she took a chance and tried to upgrade one of the remainders too, willing to stop maintaining the spares. A flash of azure later, she felt the drain again, more intensively than before. The two remaining golems stopped moving, and she could feel the control over her own limbs fade. With panicked haste, she released the latest transformation and shot back into one of the safe bodies, but the damage had been done already. There was no trace of life

left in her latest experiment, despite the fact that her energy pool was regenerating slowly now. She should have gotten an imp to write a message to Cathy! If the blonde had released her senshi form, Ami could have empowered a fifth statue here where it counted. No use crying over spilled milk, though. She looked up at her three companions, all of which were filled with a blue light from within because the Mercury symbol floating within their chest cavity blazed brightly. They were as ready as they possibly could be.

Voices and grunts approached Ami's location. Malleus was going on the offence and still trying to claim her tunnels, it seemed. She'd have to get past this group of enemies first if she wanted to get back toward the huge Heart Chamber. Gritting her teeth (just into how much detail did the golems go when they replicated her body?), she crossed and then spread her arms, unleashing a Shabon Spray. Dark bubbles shot down the hall, momentarily illuminating the unfinished rock where they rushed past with their paradoxical white glare, until they impacted behind the breach and turned into a black miasma. Ami faltered in her step and stared, perplexed and feeling like screaming. Why were her own powers acting up now? Getting the spell out had felt like nails scratching over a chalkboard, and the reserves in her still half-empty mana reservoir had dropped noticeably.

The oscillating darkness of the corrupted spell wafted over the first enemies, eliciting short gasps of surprise and irritation. A moment later, they turned into howls of pain and terror when the dark magic performed the same task of blinding and disorienting the targets that Mercury's usual chilly fog would have. Sailor Mercury's first spell usually only made an opponent scream when he stumbled over something and stubbed his toe. This however... Ami covered her mouth ineffectually with a transparent hand as she saw monsters claw at their eyes in the darkness. Blood was flowing from their ears and noses, and Ami had serious misgivings about entering the area. While one part of her mind was repulsed and appalled at the suffering her spell was causing, the cold, analytical soldier part was urging her to take advantage of the situation and hurry onwards. She could try to figure out what had gone wrong - or was that right? - later.

Feet of ice clattered on the ground as the golem group burst into action. The blood-coated female forms leaned forward deeply as they sprinted through the tunnel, ignoring the distracted enemy creatures wherever possible. An elbow jab threw a muscular orc out of the way and against the wall. Ami could hear the impacts of her soldiers alighting on the ground behind her after they cleared the body writhing on the ground.

"Stop them you fools! Do I really have to do everything *myself*?" Malleus' voice thundered through the vaults. A massive, blob-like shape with long horns, its scarred eyeballs flaring like burning coals, positioned itself in front of the jagged hole that Ami's imps had dug through the wall earlier. She leaped backward as the demon jerked its head around, the attached morningstar whirring in an arc toward her. Without exchanging a word, the minions behind her picked up on her intentions, and the right one caught the chain behind the spiked ball and pulled, partly dragging the demon out of position as it was forced to lean forward. The left statue lunged, body near-horizontal as her leap carried her through the small gap between the monster's bulk and the wall. A quick kick to the back of the head later sent the already imbalanced demon toppling face-first into the dirt. Ami and the others wasted no time with trying to put it down for good and just jumped over it as they made their way into the dungeon.

Under Ami's spell, the hallway looked like something out of a nightmare. The darkness over-exaggerated the height of the square pillars reinforcing the wall like wooden supports in a mine, and the top of the Gothic arches they formed disappeared in the shifting darkness. Fingers of turquoise light stabbed down from the crystals in the ceiling, illuminating small circular spots of the mosaic on the ground. From time to time, one of the monsters whimpering in the shadows would stumble through it on its way to take a wild swing at the intruders, flashing up brightly in the process. The team of fast-moving statues had little trouble avoiding them, being much speedier than before. Behind them, they heard the Keeper roar angrily. Ami risked a glance over her shoulder and ducked just in time when a giant axe blade that had formerly been a trap component whooshed past overhead. The half-moon shaped arc of metal was as wide as she was tall and made a loud clang when it

buried itself in a wall. Furniture, broken traps, candelabras, even incapacitated minions lifted off the ground as if carried onward by a giant wave while Malleus' invisible presence thundered down the corridor behind the intruder, using all of these objects as projectiles. Ami's black fog parted before the incoming form and washed over something that appeared like a giant skull with a wide-open maw, visible only due to the blackness streaming around it like veils. It provided ample motivation to run faster.

As if throwing large, unwieldy things at the golem party wasn't enough, the enemy Keeper resumed his earlier tactic of dropping minions in their way. In senshi form, the golems had better reflexes and much higher durability, and even if one tripped over an obstacle and rolled forward over the floor, another was quickly at its side and pulled her back to her feet roughly before speeding up again. The simple fact of the matter was that with doors already smashed, traps disabled, and enemies disoriented, the small group was moving too fast for the opponents to throw up an efficient blockade, Ami thought as she punched a troll who had appeared in her path in the gut. A zone of brightness ahead alerted her to incoming danger, but a comet-like ball of fire still clipped her. It melted her right arm off close to the shoulder even as she tried to twist out of the way. A trio of warlocks stood in a wide triangle that was free of the sense-attacking magic, looking as if two were preparing more attack spells, while the third hooded wizard kept turning his staff in a circle, keeping the eagerly-seeking tendrils of dark magic at bay. *"Fire!"* Two of the statues flanking Ami shot their fingers into the mages' direction, and one let out a shriek of pain as he went down. The other two had magical shields up, and the ice ricochetted off of the purplish planes. It kept them from attacking though, which was enough for the intruders to run right past them and disappear into the thinning haze. Ami felt herself shrink as the arm regrew.

Guardhouse. Turn right. Those wall curtains like giant peacock feathers - left. Close to the main chamber now. A surge of ambient mana gave Ami a split second warning of the fact that Malleus had scraped together enough power to throw a magical attack of his own. She jumped backward, but it was not nearly enough time to get out of the way. The leading golem glowed bright as the midday sun, its outline white from the heat contained within, before exploding

outward into a sphere of eye-searing brightness. One of the statues tackled Ami, interposing herself between the Keeper and the incoming wall of fire. As if in slow motion, the senshi could see the shockwave lift tiles from their spots, rip curtains off the walls and snap solid pillars like twigs as it inexorably rolled toward her, shifting to a deeper orange as it expanded. Through the transparent ice body of the golem shielding her, she could observe the moment when the flames touched her protector and the ice and water contained within flash-vaporised. The resulting jet of steam propelled her away from the explosion with great force, and she hurtled through the air, barely ahead of the creeping destruction. Quick-witted, she held on to one of the pillars as she flew past, letting the momentum yank her around. After a quarter turn, she let go, having changed her trajectory enough to land in the wind shadow of a swanky fireplace. An instant later, the explosion roared past, its heat still great enough to make steam rise from her chest and face.

Ami let herself relax, her back losing contact with the wall she had been hugging. She looked down at herself to see a number of long stone shards embedded in her shell like daggers. A quick head count revealed that only one other golem had survived the inferno, following her example. Not enough. She had to risk two more spells, one to turn the room back from its furnace-like condition to something she could actually traverse, the other to replace at least one of her soldiers. Once again, the corrupted version of the Shabon Spray appeared instead of the regular one, but fortunately the darkness also eagerly sucked in the heat. Her replacement golem suffered from a similar problem, looking more like a jagged piece of obsidian than the smooth and slender statue Ami had come to expect. Its shape was somewhat what the senshi thought she'd have looked like if she had born as a youma, all fangs and horns, claws and spines. She had no way to try again though, as she could barely concentrate, so she resigned herself to empowering that abomination too before moving on. Maybe one more spell at most, and she'd be all out! Fortunately, the entrance to Malleus' heart chamber should be right across the next bend.

An orc charged the group with eyes like red magma pits, but a salvo of detaching fingers dispatched it before it could do damage. Of

more concern was the pile of blinded minions blocking the entrance, with the Keeper dropping more out of thin air as Ami watched. The heap looked impressive, but was little more than a last ditch defence, she figured. And the base had to be larger than the top, which meant that, with a few key pieces gone, it should all come crashing down. A quick scan with her visor quickly identified the hapless monsters. She had her two companions move forward, avoiding another possessed bile demon in the process, and with united strength, they dragged two bedraggled looking orcs out of the heap, which collapsed in on itself. The top of the entrance became visible, and the three golems jumped simultaneously to get through the gap. When Ami's head crested the hill, she could see the darkened hall beyond, filled with moans and whimpers of creatures affected by her spell, and of course the pyramid with her target on top - and a giant, gaping maw straight ahead of her! With no way to correct her course in mid-air, she could only watch as her jump carried her higher. Something glowed in the throat of the beast, and then the monstrous-looking golem to her left was engulfed by a stream of dragonfire, and it melted away like a snowflake in the sun. She brought up her hands even as the statue to her left did the same, and the young dragon was hit by a salvo of a full twenty fingers. It didn't even flinch despite the icicles stuck in its scaly skin, and its possessed red eyes glared down on the surviving duo as they landed in a crouch on the other side of the obstacle.

The pyramid holding the enemy dungeon heart was less than a stone throw away, but every metre between here and there held an enemy that Ami had to get past if she wanted to reach it. Most of them were out of action, but not the dragon. Well, it couldn't go after two targets at once. She prepared to throw herself to the left, expecting the underling on her right to dodge to the other side - right about now! Not taking an eye off the scaled green monster towering over the both of them, she launched herself forward, waiting for the dragon to decide after whom it should go. The bolts of ice shearing through her right knee came as a complete surprise. As she fell, she turned to look back at the other statue with disbelief-widened eyes. Its arms were still extended, finger stumps already regrowing after firing. Before she could ask the traitor any questions, the dragon's tail slammed into her. It was only due to her senshi enchantments that the ice body survived the blow, being hardened to the point that

breaking it required more force than just moving its weight. Instead of shattering into shards, she was swept across the floor and thrown into the masses of blindly milling soldiers, leaking water from a network of cracks. The dragon had already turned back to the other statue, who looked around with a blank expression. Crunch! The ice splintered between the jaws of the beast, without ever trying to defend itself.

Ami used the distraction for an all-out sprint toward the dungeon heart. By now, she was small enough that the other creatures she was weaving around were all a head taller than her, hiding her from the great lizard's sight. Only a few more steps and then the stairs- a whooshing noise made her look up, just in time to see the green dragon spread its bat-like wings as it took off, flying in her direction. With the need for stealth gone, she leapt over the remaining crowd and started running up the golden stairs - only to come to a sudden stop when the dragon's flame washed over the steps directly in front of her. The wind of the monster's wingbeat fanned the flames upward as it dived at her in order to correct its near miss. Ami was determined to reach the heart before the beast could get her. She rushed up the stairs, and her feet lost traction when the still hot metal melted the ice beneath her soles. With an undignified "Eeep!", she fell backward, rolling down the stairs. The spinning stopped when a clawed hand stomped down on her, pinning her head-over to the side of the pyramid. The Keeper in the dragon's body smirked cruelly before belching up a gout of flame that shot toward the trapped figure. Feeling it disintegrate between his claws, he reared his head back and laughed.

Footsteps from above made him stop short. There, running up the stairs was a human girl who resembled the golems, dressed in a provocatively short skirt and a white bodysuit. With an angry growl, he shifted his mass to lunge after her.

Ami hurried. Her real body was at stake now, but she wouldn't give up so close to the target. One more step. Her boots were hissing and smoking as they touched the hot metal. Ignore the pain. Another step. Leathery wingbeats behind her. The dragon shouldn't be able to breathe fire again so quickly after the last time, she hoped. Nearly at the plateau with the dungeon heart superstructure now. The

pyramid vibrated under its anxious heartbeats, but her own felt a lot louder. A giant, winged shape rising behind her. One more step, leap! The senshi dived forward, passing the pillars surrounding the heart and, aimed at the pit within. The sound of the dragon sucking a deep breath into its lungs made her twist her torso around in mid-air. A bright glow surged up through the monster's gaping throat - pointed directly at her!

"Shabon Spray Freezing!"

A stream of jagged black ice shot from her palms, meeting the incoming burst of fire head on. Heat and cold clashed, and the stream of dark ice was pushed back, blossoming out into sharp spikes around the advancing pillar of fiery breath. During the struggle, Ami was still falling into the dungeon heart. The ice shooting from her hands returned to its regular colour a moment before the flames burned a circular hole into the barrier, turning it into a spiky black wreath. The counter-attack had done its job though, and had protected Ami long enough for her to drop below the path of the flames. They only roared past close enough to give her a new tan before she disappeared beneath the exterior walls ringing the dungeon heart's central pit. Gravity assessed itself, and what remained of the cored ice disk came crashing down around Ami, right after she had slammed into the rosy, beating membrane spanning the core of the dungeon heart. It was soft, but felt surprisingly resilient. Knowing that every second counted, she sat up, grabbed the largest obsidian-looked shard of ice she could find, and stabbed down at the beating heart again and again. With each blow, its colour turned more sickly, and she felt herself sink deeper, as if the flesh was going more flaccid.

The green light of the mana motes gathering above was suddenly blotted out by a large lizard head appearing in the circular field of vision she had from down here in the pit. Drool dripped from the opening maw. A final, frantic stab, and the membrane's resistance gave way. The red-eyed dragon above let out a pained mewl as the ice shard parted the now unprotected flesh, almost piercing through to the darkness below. The black icicle in Ami's shaking hands wavered as she looked up at the draconic face with defiance, but the sharp end stayed within the bleeding, oozing gash, and the slightest

downward shove would puncture it completely. "Malleus! Your life is in my hands! Submit or die!"

"You- you wretched little- Had you faced me at my full power, this would have never happened! You are like a carrion-eating vulture! But yes, I surrender," the dragon deflated after its burst of anger, "you leave me no choice."

A surge of energy from the depths of the heart shot up into Ami, spiralling around her body in purplish streamers as it was absorbed into her. She could feel new links snapping into place in her mind, and suddenly, she had a map of Malleus' dungeon in her head. She could even feel the magic go taut around the defeated keeper, chaining his mind to her will. With a breath of relief, she carefully removed the icicle - it wouldn't do to destroy what she had fought so hard for by accident - and let herself sink backward onto the beating membrane in exhaustion.

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Knowledge Hard Earned (DARK)

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"I hate waiting like this!" Cathy underlined her exclamation by hitting the wood of the table with her open palm, making the upside down playing cards arrayed before her jump.

"Nothing you can do about it," Jered replied, flipping through his deck. His chair was in constant danger of tipping over, rocking on its back legs in rhythm with the brown-haired man's foot pushing against the edge of the table. To his right, between him and his girlfriend, sat Snyder, straight-backed and looking out of place in his red and white acolyte robes. He frowned at the cards in his hand, brown eyes narrowing. Across from him, the fourth player, a slim goblin with skeletally thin arms and wild eyes, giggled madly to herself. She was counting the pile of coins resting before her, easily the largest one on the table.

"I'm sure Mercury will do her best," Snyder said, putting down a card and then smoothing his hair with the same hand in an unconscious gesture. "She seems the diligent type."

"Still, it has been a long time! Battles don't usually take this long! Is she trying to turn this into a siege?" the blonde harrumphed.

"Keeper enjoying spoils of battle," the goblin suggested with a grin, her eyebrows wiggling suggestively.

The acolyte shook his head "I rather doubt that. Her reputation is based on a misunder-"

A black bolt of lightning shot from the ceiling, struck an imp in the forehead, and bounced. The targeted creature squealed and staggered, while the blob of darkness expanded into Ami, who landed flat on her back on the ground with a little "Oof."

Chairs scraped on the floor as the players shot to their feet. "Mercury! You are back!" Cathy approached with a few steps until

she stood over the prone blue-haired figure, who was massaging her temples. Taking in the charred state of the Keeper's boots and her unusual arrival, she came to the obvious conclusion, and sighed. "It didn't go well, did it?"

Ami blinked a few times, to bring the blonde figure looming over her into focus, and slowly sat up. "Actually, I won. I'm just too tired to do anything much." She underlined the statement with a yawn, which she quickly hid behind a hand.

"So why are you here if you won? I thought you'd be busy organising things over there," Jered asked.

"In short, there were a number of unpredictable complications, and I didn't want to stay over there all alone and unable to use my magic. I can keep an eye on things through Keeper powers though," she added sleepily when she saw the alarmed faces of her companions.

"No- no more magic? How did that happen?" Snyder asked, looking at the soles of her boots, which were disintegrating. "Is that why you haven't healed up your feet yet?"

"And why were you even in a position where you could get hurt?" The swordswoman demanded, "Keepers aren't supposed to fight in person!"

"I don't think she can hear you," Jered pointed down, where Ami had sunk back on the ground, closed her eyes, and wasn't moving. One of the imps scuttled over and draped a blanket over her.

"Sheesh, what did she do? You, imp, go fetch a mattress!" Cathy pointed at one of the omnipresent servants, who looked up at her with big, black eyes and a questioning expression, but then disappeared in the direction of the bedrooms.

Jered stepped to her side and looked down at the girl for a while. He briefly considered that if he wanted to clear his name, now would be the best opportunity to kill the Keeper that he'd ever get. Then again, she wasn't really the bad sort, and murdering her would be needless and distasteful, especially if she had managed to acquire a safe haven. Besides, being in the employ of a non-evil Keeper certainly

had the potential to be profitable. No, he'd better forget about this idea. "Snyder, see if you can heal her. We'll need her back in top shape as soon as possible!"

Ami didn't know how long she had slept when she woke from her - fortunately dreamless - sleep, but she felt well rested and hungry. Maybe now she could get started on benefiting from her earlier victory, if her magic was back. She had just told Malleus to heal up his wounded creatures before she left. Of course, what Ami hadn't counted on was being ambushed by nearly all of her employees as soon as she left the room. The magicians and adventurers were waiting around the door in a semi-circle and started to talk all at once, making it impossible to understand any of them.

"Keeper, there is something that needs to be dealt with urgently," Tasbaal managed to make himself heard by using his massive belly like a ram that pushed aside the competitor's for Ami's attention. "During your absence, there was a huge build-up of denatured magic around your dungeon heart, a lot more severe than the last time. It is imperative that it be funnelled off safely, as it might detonate at any moment if left to its own devices," the evil monk continued.

Ami got a sinking feeling. "This is going to be complicated?" she asked, and was unsurprised by the answer.

"Unfortunately so. I will need the assistance of you and my colleagues here. I have already drawn up the diagrams for the necessary wards and equipment to make sure that the process goes smoothly and safely. However, you will need to create a channel to the outside so the chaotic energies can vent, and-"

"AHEM," someone interrupted, "none of that's necessary. Already dealt with it," the Alchemist looked smugly at his more arcanely inclined rival.

"You? You are nothing but a glorified cook! You want me to believe that you safely set up the mystical wards to drain the heart chamber of dangerous mana? On your own, no less?" the fat man's cold reply

left no doubt about how ridiculous he found that idea.

"Nah, tossed some chickens in. Pretty fireworks when the magic went after them, too. You might want to have someone clean the chamber, though, Keeper," the mad professor said with a nod toward Ami, enjoying every second of this exchange and making the ex high-priest sputter and look like a complete fool.

"Good work," Ami praised him, glad that *she* wouldn't have to lose time dealing with that problem. "While we are on the topic of chaotic magic, could you please tell me what happened to the previous victims?"

"Unfortunately, we only just managed to stabilise their state. It is a highly interesting outcome though, worthy of further study. Really, it is a shame to cure it rather than using it as the fascinating research opportunity it is," Tasbaal reported.

"I will be the judge of that," Ami reprimanded him, offended by the veiled suggestion. "In fact, if there is no other pressing problem, I want all of you to go back to work on it, please."

"As you wish, Keeper." Slowly, the trio of assistants scuffled away, their curiosity unsatisfied. Ami turned toward the trio of adventurers still present, who looked all to eager to ask their own questions. Very well, taking time for an after-action report and lunch was something she should be able to afford to do. For what she had planned, she wanted to be as fit as possible. Her stomach growled its agreement.

"I was out for a whole day?" Ami's eyes widened, and she nearly dropped her knife. She hadn't thought that she had been that tired.

The others around the table nodded. "You had us worried there for a time," Jered confessed, waving his gnawed-on chicken leg by the bone to punctuate his statement.

"Let's go over this battle again," Cathy said, giving the blue-haired girl enough time to chew and swallow. "First, you arrived, spread out your troops, and created cover with your fog spell. Nothing I would

object against yet, aside from maybe leaving the spread-out golems vulnerable to being wiped out by superior numbers, but you were sure there weren't any enemies on the surface." The blonde had actually taken down notes when Ami had told them about the assault on Malleus' fortress, and was now staring at them with concentration. "However, the way you handled the intrusion. Sloppy. You should have tried to avoid the traps, not thrown everything into the meatgrinder."

Ami looked up from her rapidly emptying plate. "That's obvious, in hindsight. However, at that point, I did not know yet that I would eventually run out of reinforcements," she defended herself. "Yes, I could have made them avoid the traps. Some of them, at least, as most were positioned in a way to be unavoidable with what I had. It would have cost me all of the momentum of my attack, though, and the longer I lingered, the more likely it would have been that the enemy could have figured out a counter."

"Very well, I will not linger on that point. Just make sure to test all your new abilities properly before you use them in a major battle in the future."

The young Keeper nodded. "Time permitting, of course."

Cathy wasn't done yet "I am also disappointed by the combat performance of the golems. You said your fog was up, but they still got their arse handed to them?"

"My fog didn't help much because the Keeper often transported his troops right next to them, and his creatures were well trained for close combat. Much better than me, really," Ami admitted.

"We *will* work on remedying that," the swordswoman promised in a tone that made the hair on the teenager's neck rise. It was the scolding voice of an angry teacher, something that Ami was very unfamiliar with being directed at herself. "You did trick your way past some of the troops though, even despite the Keeper?"

"I think he was busy searching for my non-existing dungeon by that point," Ami guessed. "I'd have to ask him."

"In other words, you were lucky," Jered interjected, having finished off his meal.

"Now, now, don't be too hard on her. She did win in the end," Snyder felt it necessary to point out.

"We can't keep relying on luck! That point where Malleus got cocky and buried you under creatures? Luck! Getting that black mist instead of your regular one? Luck! Surviving his big fireball? Luck again! Even the fact that you are still alive now was pure luck! What were you thinking, trying to fight a dragon in your own body? If it hadn't been for that *lucky* icicle landing next to you... Luck, luck, and more luck! By any reasonable expectations, you should have lost that battle," Cathy trailed off, calming down a bit after the short rant. Her frown deepened. "And then there's the worrisome fact that your powers seem to become more and more unreliable. First, your ability to use magic fades, then those corrupted spells, and finally one of your creations even turns on you!"

"That last one might not actually have been Mercury's fault," Snyder came to Ami's defence, "there are rumours about Keepers being able to hex heroes into attacking their own allies, and then letting them face the consequences."

Cathy paused to re-evaluate. "Well, I guess that would be the least damning interpretation of what happened. I hope that's what the problem was. But it still doesn't explain the other weirdness! And of course, there was still more foolishness. Experimenting on your golems when you already knew that it could lead to you losing more of your irreplaceable forces?"

Ami hung her head. "The regular golems were nearly useless in the situation anyway, and therefore I thought the potential benefits would warrant the risk," the girl explained her tactical decision.

"At which point again did we decide on the brilliant idea of going to war with largely untested equipment and abilities again, against the most difficult target we could find?" the blonde sighed.

"It is not as if we had much choice," Snyder objected once more, "we were on a tight schedule. In fact, we still are. Mercury still

doesn't have a second dungeon heart."

"I'll listen to your opinion on untested equipment once you mange to make a ward that doesn't malfunction in some way," the swordswoman turned to the redhead, who ducked under her glare. Satisfied that the interloper was suitably cowed, she fixed Ami with her stare again. "And then, there was this final and worst blunder. What in the name of all that's good possessed you to press on and risk everything when the last golem was destroyed? There were two other potential targets! There is some point at which persistence becomes a vice, rather than a virtue!"

Ami set her cutlery down, having finished her meal. "But it worked!"

"Yes. It worked," Cathy looked nearly chagrined to admit it, "but only through dumb luck! If anything had gone only a little bit worse, you'd be dead and at the dark gods non-existing mercy, and all of us here would be doomed, too. You have a responsibility to not risk your life like that! No more reckless plans for you!"

Ami blushed slightly "Um, I'm afraid you won't like what I have to do next then, either." She explained about what the Reaper had told her she would be necessary.

"You are right, I don't like it," Cathy said, arms akimbo.

"I'm not a fan of the idea of you sifting through some Keeper's deranged mind, especially on the suggestion of the Reaper. You haven't been entirely happy with the outcome of any of *his* plans yet," Jered commented, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

Even Snyder did not seem enthused by the idea. "What if he fights it and you end up in the wrong body again?"

"Sorry, but it's really the only way," Ami insisted. "Even if Malleus was willing to talk, which I doubt, I wouldn't have the time to learn all of this the regular way. The Baron's going to arrive any day now. I'm afraid there simply is no other option." She gave the acolyte a faint smile. "Don't worry, I have a lot more practice with the possession spell now. I'm confident that complications like that are a thing of the past."

"Very well," Cathy said, letting her shoulders droop, "but we will go over this battle again later in much more detail. You should also think about how to replace your golems' water during combat to give them enhanced durability, and possibly other improvements as well."

It was time to dive into the mind of Keeper Malleus to retrieve the all-important knowledge about how to create new dungeon hearts, and whatever other salient information she could get while she was at it. She was currently inhabiting an imp body that she had teleport-hopped across the continent until it was close to the conquered dungeon. She would travel the rest of the way via possession spell, as she felt no need to announce her presence. She had the link binding Malleus clearly in the mind, feeling like a heavy chain that was under constant tension. Following it to its destination would not be difficult at all.

Malleus was in the process of sulking about his recent defeat when tendrils of black lightning shot through the wall from above and wrapped around him. His true form was that of a human male, black-haired, with a tanned skin tone, and a face and a build that would have made a classical statue envious. The result of magic, of course. He wouldn't lift a finger if it wasn't absolutely necessary. Exercise? Him? No, that was for lesser beings. The sudden pressure on his mind interrupted a pleasant fantasy about the Keeper who had beaten him being devoured piece by piece by her own ice golems. The little bitch, she hadn't even found it necessary to introduce herself before ordering him - *him* - around and then leaving. He had, of course, chosen to interpret the command in his own way. Heal up his minions? Oh, he would. Eventually. Right now, they could suffer for their failure. But he'd better repel this insolent invader now *"You! You may have extorted vassalage from me, but my mind and body are my own! BEGONE!"*

The willpower barrier around the Keeper's mind hardened as he sucked in mana from his dungeon heart, nearly emptying it in the process. If that overconfident twit wanted to slam into his protections hard enough that the impact would leave her a drooling vegetable, well, he certainly wouldn't complain. Ami's first experience with a

resisted possession had been a horned reaper, and she put just as much effort in the current attempt as she had then. Malleus was powerful, but he was no Reaper. He reeled under the initial clash of wills, irritated and quite vexed that the enemy had put just as much strength into her blow as he had put into his defence. The feeling quickly turned to dismay when the icy pressure kept up as strongly as it had arrived, while his own resistance ran out of steam and ripped apart under the assault like wet paper.

"Get out! Get out get OUT! Hate you! Hate, hate hate you!"

Ami could hear the the Keeper throw a temper tantrum in his mind, but she was in control of the body, which was sitting in a comfy armchair, wearing what seemed to be a gold-studded bathrobe, with its legs raised and lying on fluffy footrest. She pushed the annoying presence deeper, until its rage-filled stream of consciousness was nothing but an impotent distraction, and prepared the next step. Now that she had control of the body, she'd have to observe the mind, which needed a soft touch if she didn't want to cause irreversible damage. She let herself sink deeper into the core of Malleus' being until she touched some random memories that she could use to orient herself.

... demons dragging people out of houses made from baked mud bricks into streets that ran red with blood, while the city burned all around them, and embers and tortured screams rose into the night. She hovered across the chaos, revelling in the suffering she had unleashed on her home country...

Not this. This certainly wasn't what she was looking for! Shaken, Ami skipped past the horrors, looking for the memories that interested her. It seemed to be impossible to experience them from a detached third-person viewpoint. Distantly, she could hear Malleus mock her for her weakness.

Had any creatures been in the inner sanctum, they would have witnessed the most unusual sight of Malleus' face going deep red in apoplectic rage even as tears streamed from his eyes and his hands balled into fists so hard that the nails bit into the skin.

... laughing as the villagers of the hamlet above resorting to cannibalism after she had ordered them all thrown into a giant pit, faces distorted into expressions of greatest despair...

The body sitting in the armchair was violently sick, which lead to unpleasant choking and coughing when it proved to be incompatible with the gnashing of teeth that was already going on. By now, Ami was moving through Malleus' mind with no care for what it would do to him, allegorically ripping open the drawers containing memories as she plundered the mansion that was his mind. If only he had shown some remorse, some indication that he was feeling bad about what he'd done. Instead, the only thing she sensed from the direction of his consciousness was a faint sense of nostalgia, and amusement at her reaction to what she was seeing.

...the baby in her hands screamed. The dark gods rewarded sacrifices well, in proportion to their value. And what sacrifice could be more valuable than an own son? Now, Murdrul the Devourer liked his sacrifices to be in agony, so the knife crept downwards, moving inexorably toward the child's wide-open, tear-filled eyes...

Ami saw red. Malleus was going to die! He'd be dead the moment she had everything useful she could get out of him, she promised herself when she finished dry-heaving. The worst part was that everything felt as if she was committing these atrocities herself. Reluctantly, Ami forced herself to continue tearing through the monster's mind at even greater speed, determined to get what she wanted so she could stop digging through these obscenities.

...a king sank to his knees in despair, after she had enchanted him into slaughtering his whole family...

...and so, what had once been a rich and fertile nation became a forsaken desert...

...slavery and abuse of all kinds...

Ami finally finished the excruciating, stomach-turning journey through the slaughter-filled madhouse that was Malleus' eight

hundred years of existence. By the end of it, she was too numb to feel much of anything, and the mind-voice of the Keeper had become three different speakers, each one gibbering incomprehensible things. Still within the foreign body, Ami slowly stood up. She was probably in shock, she thought. That meant she would most likely repress most of what she had seen, which was a blessing, really. However, she couldn't afford to lose any of the skill and knowledge she had acquired so painfully from the evil thing - she was unwilling to classify Malleus as human any more. Well, there was a simple solution. On her mental command, the imps in her own dungeon started to dig out a new room for a library where she could store all the pilfered magical lore, something that was laughably easy with the stolen experience. Especially the relevant parts about dungeon hearts needed to be preserved. That way, all knowledge should survive any self-healing her psyche was hopefully going to undertake.

The great hall with the golden pyramid was empty, except for a few imps, when what looked like the Keeper appeared out of thin air, looking pale, shaking, and clad in expensive silks stained with vomit. He stood on top of the pyramid, before the beating heart. A flash of black later, a smaller, more slender figure stood next to him, dressed in a very short skirt and form-fitting leotard with ribbons. The instant colour fully returned to Ami's re-materialising shape, a loud crack came from her left. Malleus was looking backward without having turned his torso, neck unceremoniously snapped by a swift application of Ami's power to move her underlings. With clinical detachment, she watched the body fall over backward like a puppet with its strings cut. The moment the Keeper died, the rumbling beat of the dungeon heart ceased, and its superstructure started to dissolve into a curtain of green motes, as did Malleus' imps. While his corpse rolled down the stairs, the lights in the dungeon went out one by one, and the blue-haired girl could feel her awareness of the surroundings fade as the dark artefact sank into inertness. Already, she could hear alarmed voices from elsewhere as the vaults lost power.

With a sound like a closing coffin lid, a circular stone plate slid into

place above the sleeping heart. Ami wasted no time and knelt down, took her right glove off and rubbed her knuckles over the uneven surface until they bled. The necessary will to use the dungeon heart was there in spades. She didn't only want this, she needed it! A magical power source to re-activate the dark artefact was no problem at all, as she was already connected to a different one. She rose and took a step back, shielding her face as the plate exploded upward and the heartbeat started up again. From afar, she heard gasps and shouts. Those of Malleus' creatures who were mostly healthy had arrived and were staring at the limp body at the bottom of the pyramid. Backlit by the pillar of azure light shining from the pit of the dungeon heart, Ami glowered down at them, and created golem after golem, until six of the mail-clad icy simulacrums knelt to both sides of her.

"He," she gestured toward the corpse in a strange, inflectionless tone of voice, "had angered me *greatly*." At the last word, her eyes blazed bright enough red to rival the brilliance behind her, and the intruders cowered. "Does anyone of you have a problem with serving me instead?"

The minions looked at each other, unsure about what to make of her neutral tone of voice. Without a portal, it would be a *long* trek through the desert. Besides, once power returned to the traps...

A warlock stepped forward first. "I shall serve you, Keeper, if you will have me."

Ami nodded. "Good. All of you who want to join me, line up in a row and commune with the heart, please, one after the other. As for the others..." how could she get them to clear out fast? She didn't want any potential hostiles around. The knowledge of the departed Malleus came to her rescue, and for a moment, she sounded eerily like the late Keeper "...well, getting a head start would be in their best interest."

The creatures who had previously been undecided were suddenly in a hurry to get in line. As they were evil, there was much pushing and vying for position, but Ami's golems did a good job of maintaining order. Just to be on the safe side, she added another dozen. A last urgent and sad task remained.

Ami appeared in what couldn't really been called Malleus' harem. A harem implied that the owner felt at least some appreciation or attachment toward the women in it. To Malleus, the poor girls chained naked to the walls were nothing but objects of convenience, there to sate his lusts and produce offspring. Despite the gluttony that his dark god had favoured so, the late Keeper had preferred his mates extremely thin, near anorexic. Ami looked over the long row of broken, dim-eyed, and unresponsive victims, and felt like crying. She could see bones under the skin of the underfed girls, and even thought she recognised a few of them from some of the more embarrassing scenes that she had lived in Malleus memory. To her surprise and mortification, she felt her body react to the remembered stimuli and the sights. She whirled around, blushing, and looking at the blank wall of the chamber, rather than the unclad forms. She was sure that if her emotions weren't inhibited at the moment and she was thinking clearly, she would be *really* freaking out at the implications. Instead, she snapped her fingers, causing all the manacles to open. The captives slid or staggered to the floor, unsure of what was going on.

Awkwardly, Ami stammered an explanation. "I- err, Keeper Malleus is dead. Um. I'm sorry that I have no way to get you back to your homes, but I'll send you to his inner sanctum instead, where the monsters can't get in. Please feel free to take anything you need and eat as much as you want. I'll try to help more when I know how. Just try to get better for now, yes?"

There was discouragingly little response from the freed slaves, and Ami hoped some rest and better treatment would get them to recover. She really had no idea how to best help them, so she just went with what she had told them before transporting herself back to the pyramid. Her collection of Malleus' ex-minions was growing nicely and steadily, and she felt that she could return to her original dungeon in order to come to terms with what she had learned. She stepped into the dungeon heart, using a tidbit of information she had gleaned from the cesspit that was the dead Keeper's mind, and bridged the distance in an instant, with none of the inconvenient hopping involved.

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Moving On (DARK)

Originally on 2009-11-18T02:09:00

Ami appeared hovering above the central pit of her original dungeon heart and drifted forward until her feet touched the ground. A smell of roasted chicken and burning feathers greeted her. Imps scuttled around with mops and buckets to take care of the aftermath of her alchemist's unorthodox solution to the wild magic problem. Most of the gunk and slimy stuff was gone, but some of the weirder results were beyond her little servant's abilities. The angry chicken head protruding from a wall and pecking at them with a beak as big as their heads was given a wide berth, and from the ceiling hung what looked like an upside-down tree, covered completely in large feathers. It was out of the little critters' reach, but at least it didn't seem to be harming anything. Nothing that was important enough to warrant her attention, for now.

She shuffled through the corridors, rather than simply teleporting, as she needed time to sort through her thoughts. Malleus' mind had been a treasure trove full of knowledge about the dungeon heart, ways to use it, and generally useful information on being a Keeper. Ami sighed and still felt awful. She had achieved what she had set out to do, but had it been worth the price? She looked at her hands. She had blood on them now, and she didn't mean the scabs forming on her knuckles.

Jered, Snyder, and Cathy looked up from their game as the door opened. Enthusiastic greetings died in their throats when they noticed the pallor of Ami's skin and the stiff way in which she approached and pulled out a chair, before flopping down bonelessly on it.

"Mercury? Are you all right?" the acolyte was the first to ask, half standing as he leaned over the table to get a closer look at the girl.

"I- well, yes, I'm uninjured," she replied in a monotone.

"That doesn't sound very convincing," Cathy said, looking concerned. "Did something go wrong?"

"N-no, everything went just as planned," the short-haired girl replied, not meeting the blonde's eyes.

"You don't look very happy, though," Jered pointed out the obvious, "In fact, I haven't ever seen you look worse than now, not even after the Reaper battle. What happened?"

"I saw things that... that I really didn't need to see," Ami replied quietly after a moment of silence.

"Oh. OH!" Snyder let himself fall back to his seat, a look of comprehension on his face. "Ah yes, a Keeper's memories - no wonder they disturbed you. Try to distance yourself from them. Those things happened in the past, they can't hurt you."

Cathy said nothing, and instead put a reassuring hand on the girl's shoulder.

In an attempt to change the topic to something more upbeat, Jered asked "But you got what you needed, right? You know how to make dungeon hearts now?"

"Yes." Ami rested her elbows on the table and buried her face in her palms with a sigh. "And it's... not very helpful. They literally cost their weight in gold to create, but that's not the main difficulty. The final step of the process requires beseeching the dark gods for a spark of life. If none of them feel that you are worthy, the heart will remain dead and useless," she droned tiredly.

The brown-haired man seemed to deflate. "Oh, of all the- it just had to be something like that!" He hung his head. "We are pretty thoroughly screwed then, with no way for you to make a second dungeon heart-"

"I already have one," Ami interrupted him, looking at the ground. She heard her companions suck in their breath as the atmosphere in the room suddenly seemed more tense.

"You- you didn't-" Snyder stammered, before his voice became

stronger and he straightened in his seat "No. I don't believe you prayed to the dark gods, or even if you did, that they would approve of you!"

"I- I took his," Ami explained, nearly inaudibly.

"Oh, of course. You eliminated the enemy Keeper and claimed his dungeon heart. An elegant solution to two problems at once, well done!" Jered congratulated, raising his fist in a cheer.

"NO! No, you don't understand! I didn't kill him to steal his dungeon heart!" Ami protested loudly as she jumped to her feet, surprising the others with her sudden outburst. At their questioning looks, she realised how badly that could be interpreted, and continued on.

"I didn't *plan* to kill him," she continued, as tears started to stream down her cheeks. "But when I saw his memories - it was horrible. I - at first I touched them lightly," she sniffled, "I could feel what was in there, in an abstract sense, but..." Ami paused, closing her eyes and dislodging more tears with her eyelashes as she searched for words. "Have you ever been in a situation where you knew right away something awful was going to happen, but couldn't take your eyes off it? Or where something outrageous catches you attention without you wanting to? Memories are like that, too. Before you realise it, you are experiencing a scene from his life," Ami shuddered, but as if a dam had burst, the words just continued to flow "and before you know what's going on, you are already immersed in horror, doing unspeakable things, and the more the memory puts you off-balance, the longer it takes you to snap out of it."

With eyes reddened from crying, not from any eldritch glow, the senshi looked at the faces of her companions. Dawning realization, as well as worry, flitted over their faces. Cathy's blue eyes gleamed in sympathy, and her hand on Ami's shoulder gave an encouraging squeeze.

"The first times were really hard," the blue-haired girl said, her breath quickening at the images in her head, "I didn't know what was going on and how bad it would get, and breaking free was difficult," she was nearly hyperventilating now, "it got better with more

practice, and I just saw short glimpses before moving on, but some memories, especially those with strong emotions attached, were just unavoidable. It's like when you are reading, and you are specifically trying not to notice certain words, because if you do, they suck you in. And there were just so many such memories! Flash after flash after flash after flash. Atrocity after atrocity, one more cruel than the other." Ami was swallowing now, as if fighting to keep down her bile.

"And at some point I was so angry that I decided that he had to die," she sobbed, and her hands were clenching into fists. "He, he sired children for the sole purpose of sa-sacrificing them! He was happy when he cut their throats! *Happy!* I just kept going faster and faster, ripping out what I needed, and not caring that I was destroying his mind! This wasn't a battle for life or dead, just me getting mad enough to tear apart a helpless victim." At the end of that statement, Ami's voice had become a low murmur, and the others had to strain to hear the words. She had her arms wrapped tightly around herself and pulled up her knees until she resembled a small, shivering ball.

"Helpless my arse! He was completely irredeemable and had it coming a thousand times over!" Cathy had slid near enough that she could put her arm around the shaking girl in a comforting gesture.

"I have to agree there. Any guilt over that monster's death is completely inappropriate. It was something that had to be done, and you were the only one able to do it!" Jered commented. He had his arms crossed, the only outward sign of his discomfort at the situation.

"I- that's just it. I can't feel bad about killing him! I would do it again in the same situation! I just murdered someone and I feel nothing! What is this world doing to me? I'm turning into a monster just like him!" Ami wheezed out those last words with great difficulty, as if pained to speak them.

"So you are feeling guilty for not feeling guilty?" Jered asked.

"No, that's rubbish!" Snyder slammed both palms down on the wooden surface of the table as he stood up. "Already the fact that you are worried about this means that you aren't in any danger of becoming like him! You have a conscience, he did not! He might

have looked human, but he hasn't been for a long time!" the young acolyte shouted, more passionately than Ami had ever heard him before.

"That's right! The reason you aren't feeling bad is that it was, without a doubt, *the right thing to do*!" Cathy held the shivering girl tighter, noticing how small she really was.

The support of the adventurers was making Ami feel a bit better, but she wasn't entirely convinced that they were right. She couldn't bring herself to tell them about what she had felt when she freed Malleus' enslaved women - she doubted she would ever be able to talk to anyone about that, as even her own mind shied away from it. If that ever came out, what would the others think of her? Or her friends, Usagi, Rei, and Luna? She withdrew more into herself, even as she heard the others make soothing noises.

A knock came from the door. "Keeper? Are you in there?" the call from outside sounded urgent, and the voice belonged to the tall, haggard warlock with a fake beard whose name Ami couldn't remember because he was usually so self-effacing.

"What is it?" Jered asked, giving Ami some time to re-gain her composure.

"The lookouts are reporting a large army on the East road, in the Barony's colours!" he slid the door open and looked in, only catching sight of the Keeper's back, with the blonde lieutenant's arm around her. His eyes widened a bit.

"Damn it! What lousy timing! How many?" Cathy asked, letting go of Ami, who wiped her eyes and didn't turn toward the assistant. His presence reminded her of Tasbaal, who had starred prominently in many of Malleus' memories. High priest of Murdrul indeed. She had never asked what that entailed, but now that she knew...

"How should I know? The goblins did say 'lots', which could mean anything from three upwards! Eeep! I'm sorry for disturbing you!" the last he blurted out when Ami turned to look at him with eyes flashing like bright red lanterns. The door slammed shut as he fled.

"Mercury? What's going on?" Snyder asked, alarmed at her sudden change in attitude.

She clenched her fists and took long, deep breaths to calm down before she did anything else she would regret. "Sorry, it's just the memories. He reminded me of Tasbaal. I found out that he is nearly as bad as Malleus, and I don't know what to do about him."

"I see, I see," Snyder said, "that doesn't surprise me much. I never liked him, and he's *creepy*."

Jered and Cathy exchanged a look, both understanding immediately that having to perform another execution would be devastating for Mercury's fragile psyche. "If you are concerned about justice, then truss him up and leave him to the Baron," the weasel-featured man said. "He'll get a trial according to the laws of the land. That's what you want, right?"

"That- that's a very good idea, thank you!" Ami gave him a weak but heartfelt smile and sat up a little straighter, as if a heavy burden had just been lifted from her shoulders.

"Happy to help," Jered said, "however, there is the inconvenient fact that the Baron's forces will start looking for us. Are you feeling up to organising the defence?"

Ami stood up and forcibly set her inner turmoil aside to consider the situation. "We are not going to fight," she decided. "We evacuate to the secondary site."

"But that means losing the spare dungeon heart," Jered pointed out, "you'd be back to square one!"

"I am *not* going to fight and hurt good people who are simply misguided if I can avoid it!" Ami's determined expression left no doubt that her decision was non-negotiable. "Besides, I have another plan I can try out." She turned to face the blonde, spinning so fast that her short blue skirt whipped around her legs. "Cathy, I can't easily transport people over large distances. Do you think it's worth the hassle of keeping the goblins around?"

The swordswoman, noting with some relief that Mercury seemed more composed now that her mind had a different problem to deal with, scratched her chin as she considered the question for a moment. "Nah. Discipline is lousy, they haven't learned much, and only two or three of them show any promise."

"Thanks. Please have them take their final wages and shoo them out through the portal. The beetles too, I think. They are comparatively weak and too stupid to follow elaborate orders."

The lanky warlock and the alchemist appeared in the room, both caught off-guard by the sudden transition. The latter was still in the motion of pouring a pink liquid from a vial. It dripped to the ground and etched a frothing hole into floor. Ami succinctly informed them that they were to pack up their belongings, as they would be moving to a new dungeon shortly. If they were intrigued by Tasbaal's absence, they didn't show it. The evil monk in question was currently enjoying the hospitality of a newly-built magic-proofed prison cell, its design pilfered from Malleus' mind.

Ami reappeared in front of the beating dungeon heart. Below it and out of sight, her imps were labouring. The sound of their picks striking rock could barely be heard over the rumbling heartbeat. Many things that had been puzzling her had fallen into place with what she had learned from her disturbing sifting through Malleus' brain. The artefact's magic followed some ill-defined rules of ownership in what it allowed a Keeper's powers to affect. To move something within her own territory, the target had to either serve her or to not belong to anyone else. Any such objects or persons she could also return back to her dungeon, if they stayed within a distance of around sixty kilometres of it. Of course, there were exceptions. If someone's claim conflicted with her own, whoever had the contested item in his possession was considered the real owner. Sickeningly, this rule was also applied to people, which allowed Keepers to take captives when the unfortunate victims were rendered unconscious or restrained by minions of the Keeper. An image of heroes starving wretchedly to their deaths flashed unbidden through the senshi's mind, causing her to shudder and reminding her of the cost of that information.

For objects imbued to a high degree with the Keeper's own power, such as creatures Ami had conjured herself, the rules allowed more leeway in where she could place them. Only areas claimed by others barred her access. Strangely enough, this wouldn't work for her own body. However, she counted as her own territory, for what it was worth. Being able to summon small objects to herself was very helpful, but it didn't allow for the transport of creatures. Well, unless... Ami had a brief mental picture of herself lying flat on the ground and a bile demon appearing above her. No. Didn't allow for creature transport. What it all boiled down to was that her Keeper powers were woefully inadequate for moving her employees between the dungeons. She'd have to resort to the slow and unwieldy teleportation spell that she had first used to summon the Reaper to Arachne's dungeon. Worriedly, she remembered the flames and fire that had accompanied that attempt, and was determined to first test the spell on something less resilient than a horned reaper to see if there would be any adverse effects.

Ami stepped into the dungeon heart and out on top of the great pyramid in the desert fortress. Her determination nearly faltered and she felt weak in the knees when she spotted the body still lying at the bottom of the golden construction, ignored by the ice golems playing around in the chamber. "Get that out of my sight and buried somewhere, please," she ordered, before finding a large, empty, and most importantly fireproof chamber to go to work. Despite the flashing lights, magic circles, pillar of fire, and general rise in room temperature, the imp she transported with the spell seemed unhurt by the ordeal. Sooty, yes, but there were no traces of burns - *screaming man roasted alive over glowing coals* - Ami staggered at the unwanted association, cold sweat forming on her palms. Would she have to suffer through these flashes for the rest of her life? She needed help.

The imp was unharmed, though, which was what counted. No corruption with the spell had manifested either. She still didn't know what had caused that, even with the benefit of Malleus' knowledge. She suspected that it was some effect of mixing her senshi magic with the dark power flowing from the dungeon heart, as she had ample evidence that something was going on there that she didn't understand entirely yet. The transformation side effects were one

thing, but now she also knew that her mana pool refilled at a speed that the late Keeper would have found absolutely preposterous. Now that she thought about it, even the Reaper had seemed impressed with the ease with which she threw ice magic around. She would have to postpone research into that until after the current crisis was dealt with, though.

Fortunately, summoning the five employees she wanted to keep went without a hitch, and the only complaint she got was from Snyder, who felt put upon by the soot marring his features when he walked past a mirror. After some deliberation, Ami also summoned the tentacled abomination that was Boris. The forces of Good might have been able to cure him, but with the way he looked now, they would probably think that he was a monster and slay him on sight. There was very little that resembled a human, just a large mass of pinkish and green tentacles, with shaggy patches of wiry black hairs in places. At the sight of the pseudopods, another foreign memory haunted Ami with pictures that made her stomach turn. She was still feeling really sorry for the man, though the sympathy waned a bit every time he opened his mouth. "I'm really sorry for this inconvenience, Boris," she addressed him, "I promise I'll look into a way to cure you. If all else fails, I could probably put your mind into a new body, so please don't despair!"

Teleporting all six people via spell had taken over half an hour, more than enough time for her imps to prepare for her plan. A pity she couldn't have the heart automate the magical procedure, but it had too many variables, such as different distances, origins, and destinations. Ami stepped out of the original dungeon heart and touched it, using her connection to calm it into quiescence. The effect was very similar to what had happened when Keeper Malleus had died. The three pillars and arches of the superstructure dissolved, their stone recycled to form a symbol-inscribed disc covering the sleeping heart pit. The dais the artefact was resting on also disappeared, and the torches on the wall went out. Ami had to summon her visor to see in the darkness, and the grey tones of the chamber reminded her of the terrifying first moments after her arrival. The room looked a lot like it had during those first hours, though the clucking of the monstrous chicken head and the upside-down feather tree were new. Her imps were waiting in a circle

around the inert heart, black orbs all looking at her as they waited for their next orders. With a thought, Ami was at the bottom of the deep, cylindrical shaft that the servants had dug out underneath the dungeon heart. It was just a bit wider than the fully active artefact would have been. With great care, the young Keeper scanned the precision of the spiralling winding hewn into the walls for any unevenness. When she was satisfied that the deviations from her blueprints were within tolerable ranges, she transported herself back up and nodded.

The imps struck the floor, disconnecting the dungeon heart from the surrounding rock. She knew now that this wouldn't harm it, in stark contrast to the rest of the dungeon. Her claim on the terrain shattered, along with the floor tiles and wall murals. The effect was very similar to what had happened when Arachne's had been defeated, though fortunately, there was a notable absence of a black void sucking in the Keeper.

"Careful now! Start pulling, all at once! On my mark, go!"

The edge of the round piece of rock containing the dungeon heart fit perfectly into the groove of the cylinder's winding. When the imps pulled in concert, the dungeon heart started turning around its own axis with a loud grinding noise.

"Keep going! It's working!"

Turn by turn, the dungeon heart sank deeper as it was screwed in, until it reached the bottom far below and could go no further. Now that it was back in contact with the rock, Ami reactivated it, enjoying the lightshow that she hadn't been able to pay attention to earlier today. The grooves of the winding were large enough for her imps to move in, and formed an unbroken path to the surface that allowed the reclamation of her former territory. Only two more things to do. At her direction, her workers chiselled a thick, horizontal slab of rock out of the shaft's wall close to its bottom, which they slid into place over the dungeon heart, forming a protective ceiling and hiding it from view. Ami reinforced the cover by filling the bottom quarter of the cylinder with ice, which hopefully wouldn't melt before the heroes arrived. Finally, she drew on Malleus' knowledge once more, building a fake dungeon heart over the gaping hole, in the same

spot that the original one had been. This emptied most of her treasury, but she couldn't take the wealth along easily anyway.

Further clean-up involved setting fire to the secret library full of dungeon heart lore after copying it to her new dungeon first. What had she been thinking when she had put it here in the first place, when she knew that this location was untenable? With a shake of her head, she moved herself back to the dungeon heart and used it as a gate to the desert vaults. Again, she had left the task of dealing with the harem girls for last. It was something she really didn't want to do, and everything in her screamed to run away rather than face the possibility of unwanted *reactions* again, but these women deserved to be treated with care after all they had gone through, and she wasn't going to let her own discomfort get into the way of that.

An eyeblink after appearing within Malleus' private quarters, which would have done any palace proud, she had to duck under a flying piece of pottery. It shattered against the wall, defacing an ugly landscape drawing and spraying shards all over the thick carpet. With gasps and strangled cries, the women in the room backed away from Ami, pressing themselves against the wall and staring with wide-open, terror-filled eyes. All of them had covered themselves with fine robes from the dead Keeper's wardrobe, and even the catatonic-looking ones on the ground were dressed, much to Ami's relief.

Still, she kept her eyes on the ground as she raised her hands, palms outward. "Please don't be afraid! I'm not going to harm you!"

"Who are you, and why should we believe you?" the woman who had thrown the vase asked, not relaxing one bit.

"My name is Sailor Mercury. I'm the one who destroyed Malleus," she explained.

"You are a Keeper!" the woman accused, green eyes flashing, but with despair in her voice.

"Not by my own choice. Please believe me, I am not interested in

you as the late Keeper was," *I hope. I really, really, REALLY hope!* To Ami's surprise, many of the slaves started whimpering and shivering at that. Oh, of course. They thought she was going to use them for something even worse, or just kill them outright. "No, I already told you that I'm not going to harm you! Another dungeon of mine is about to be overrun by the forces of Good, so I am going to transport you over there for them to find you. They'll be better able to help you than I am. So please don't be alarmed when some of you start disappearing. It will take me a while, as there are," her eyes darted around the room "twenty of you. Just stay here, you will be free soon, I promise!"

"As if we had any choice," another girl said with bitter resignation.

Ami looked at her, taking in the elegant curve of her jaw, and the pout on the lips that had such an inviting red- appalled at the realisation what she was thinking, Ami fled. *No, no, no! Stupid body! Darn it! She was so messed up in the head! Why did this have to happen to her? She needed professional help.* After losing her lunch, she threw herself into the work of moving the poor women, so that she wouldn't have time to think about the implications. Once done, all that remained to do was waiting for the heroes to arrive and then disconnecting the real heart the moment they destroyed the fake one. With luck, they wouldn't look any further than that, especially if the heart chamber started collapsing the moment they did, as she had prepared it to.

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Some Resolutions (DARK)

Originally on 2009-11-20T00:32:00

Ami sat on a tree branch, taking care to keep her icy body in the shade of the leafy canopy. Not from any fear of melting, but out of concern for stealth. Her skin and the frozen ringmail she was wearing would glitter like pale diamonds in direct sunlight, and she didn't want to alert anyone to her presence before she had taken stock of the situation. The oak she had chosen as perch was ancient and tall, looming high above the other trees even within this untouched forest. It was the perfect spot from which to observe the dust cloud denoting the location of the approaching army. The Baron clearly felt it unnecessary to hide his presence and was riding on a bright white horse at the front of the column, flanked by knights on both sides. Next to him, on a pony, she could make out a bent-over form in embroidered robes that could only be abbot Durval. The old man looked out of place among the heavily-armoured figures and would have fit in much better with the wizards riding to the back, holding long staves with jewels set into their ends. Numerous triangular banners waved above the formation, proudly displaying the fact that the lord of the land had arrived.

Ami did a few quick mental calculations. The dirt road was wide enough for five knights to ride comfortably next to each other, but there were only five rows of them, and a trail of regular men at arms and wagons carrying supply followed them. All in all, it looked as if the Baron had brought about three-hundred warriors, not counting the servants, squires, and assorted menials necessary for such an operation. With them, the total number was probably closer to five-hundred. For a moment, she felt herself reminded of a similar column making its way through a sandstorm on camels, unaware of the waiting ambush underneath the sand. She shook her head to clear the image away, dimly aware of the strange ringing sound her hairs of ice made from the motion. This flashback had been shorter and less defined than the ones before, which raised her hopes that the after-effects of sifting through Malleus' brain would fade on their own at some point.

Ami returned her attention to the marching troops, who seemed in no particular hurry to reach the village. Upon closer inspection, she saw that the flying forms she could make out against the background of the blue sky were not birds, as she had initially assumed. They were short, lightly built women wearing white and flying with wings that looked like those of dragonflies. Faeries? The senshi noted that they were flying a search pattern. Advanced scouts, then. Maybe the Baron wasn't relying entirely on his show of force for protection. Ami doubted she could have taken his forces on in a straight battle, not even with her golems. She had seen the wizards in combat, and they were no slouches. The abbot was an unknown, but from the ease with which he had wielded large-scale holy magic, she could conclude that he was very dangerous. The Baron himself, of course, was a Reaper-level threat in that magical armour of his. Even if he had been fighting a lazy and rusty horned reaper, the fact remained that he could go toe-to-toe with the monster and come out unharmed.

Given those facts, she was glad that she didn't have to fight. Her best chance would have been some kind of guerilla warfare, striking at the enemy before he had a chance to get closer. Now, however, it was in her best interest that he found her dungeon as quickly and easily as possible. The freed slaves within needed help, and the shorter they had to wait, the better. She tried to not to dwell on them too much, afraid that another sign of corruption would manifest. There was no real need for her to pay attention, anyway, she told herself. After all, she had left a few golems to watch over the women, with very precise instructions making sure that they would not come to harm. Nodding to herself, Ami disappeared from the tree branch, which snapped back into its original position when her weight was suddenly gone. She had to see if she could speed things up.

A hoarse voice called loudly and with increasing despair "Keeper! KEEPER! You are making a huge mistake! I am more valuable than any boon you could possibly gain from leaving me to my enemies!" Tasbaal's meaty hands were wrapped around the cold metal bars of his cell, and his shouts echoed through the dungeon's dimly-lit halls.

He wondered who of his many enemies had offered the Keeper a deal sweet enough that she would even consider handing him over. "Keeper! You will never again find anyone with my expertise and experience who is willing to work for you! You are cutting your own throat!" He was, of course, too familiar with Keepers to expect any gratefulness or loyalty from them. His only chance was convincing Mercury that he was irreplaceable. "I have learned secrets that you couldn't even dream off! My knowledge of the Dark Gods is matched only by a handful of other high priests! Whoever has convinced you that he could offer you something more valuable is tricking you!"

"I told you I heard something! We aren't alone down here with these creepy ice things," a female voice whispered. The woman it belonged to cautiously looked around the corner at the bottom of the spiral staircase, one green eye peeking out from beyond the wall as she leaned to the right.

Her companions higher up on the stairs followed with reluctant steps, hindered by the looted clothing that was several sizes too big. The shiny, flowing cloth had a propensity to get underfoot and made descending stairs difficult.

"We shouldn't go there," one of the others whispered, "what if it is a monster?"

The smaller girls behind her nodded fearfully and huddled closer together.

"It could be another prisoner, just like us," the first one speculated, "I'll scout ahead," she whispered and pulled up her too long, magenta pants as she tiptoed forward, heedless of the pleas for her to stay back. She could see one of the strange transparent statues skulking about from the corner of her eyes, but the thing seemed uninterested in getting closer. Thus, the ex-slave sneaked forward, toward the source of the noise. It didn't take her long to reach the end of the corridor that was blocked off by vertical bars reaching from the floor to the ceiling. They were spaced widely, but there was not a chance that the short figure behind them could escape. The sheer amount of fat that strained to burst out of the tattered, gold-embroidered monk robes confining them made sure of that. The prisoner fell silent as he spotted the redhead, whose form was hard

to make out with the way she clung to the shadows. He got the impression that she was pretty thin under that oversized tunic of hers. The garment looked somewhat familiar, though. Maybe this was someone he could dupe into rescuing him?

The woman froze in recognition when she got a good look at him. For a moment, her face was slack-jawed and pale, but then it twisted into a mask of fury. With her teeth bared in a snarl and the deep, angry frown lines on her brow, she looked nearly demonic. Spittle flew as she shouted "You! I remember you!"

Tasbaal couldn't say that the converse was true, so he just raised an eyebrow and stared silently.

"You sick freak! You killed my baby!"

Oh. That- that actually didn't narrow it down all that much. Great. Now he'd be stuck in this empty cell with that hysterical shrew shrieking at him. This day had just become even worse. "Ouch!" A sudden pain flared on his temple, just below the hairline. Instinctively, he reached for it, and was surprised to find his fingers wet with blood. A look through the bars showed him that the woman was bowing down, with tears running down her cheeks, to pick another piece of debris from the ground. He barely moved aside when another sharp-edged piece of rock whistled past him. "Hey! Stop that at once!"

"Ruby? We heard you shouting, are you all right?" more women were filing down the corridor, sticking together in a large group.

"Look! It's him! That murderous bastard!" a venom-filled voice in the crowd called out. "Let's get him!" Approving noises greeted the proclamation, and Tasbaal could see more of the haggard girls arming themselves with stones. The walls in this part of the dungeon were unfinished rock, so there was no lack of appropriate projectiles. The evil monk heard a faint crack as pain blossomed on his nose. He let out a curse, which rebounded off the bars and blackened the walls of his cells. The women, who had backed away at the sight of him using magic, were encouraged by the display and resumed their efforts. Their furious shouts and accusations drowned out the fat ex-high priest's howls of pain that slowly turned into whimpers.

"Huh, what have we got there?" Baron Leopold asked, looking at the glittering ice sculpture that had appeared in the middle of the road. The sunlight breaking on the smooth rings that made up the figure's armour added a few rainbow-like refractions to the otherwise colourless construct. The knights flanking him raised their shields, and a shout of warning went through the formation as it stopped.

"It appears that the Keeper has appeared for the time-honoured tradition of pre-battle taunting," Durval croaked out next to him. The abbot's grip around his staff had tightened, and the runes carved into its ivory head were filling with white light.

"Awfully sparkly for a Keeper," the noble said, "though it does resemble that blue-haired witch that was with the horned reaper."

"Indulging in the sin of vanity, no doubt," his elderly companion replied in a deadpan tone of voice.

Ami fidgeted at being the centre of attention. Being stared at was one thing. Being stared at by men on horses, who towered quite a bit over her and who were also hostile was another entirely. Fortunately, she didn't suffer from any unexpected memory flashes. Probably due to the fact that Malleus knew better than to get into this kind of situations in the first place, she thought wryly.

"You, villain! If you wanted to be impress us, you should have come in the body of the Reaper," the Baron roared.

Ami blinked. That certainly hadn't been the opening she had expected. "Sorry, he isn't here," she apologised.

"Not here? I'm insulted! Do you take me so lightly that you expect to win without him?" the ends of the Baron's moustache twitched angrily as he spoke.

"I was actually hoping we could negotiate," the ice golem replied, eliciting several disbelieving snorts from the soldiers, "There isn't any need to fight me. I didn't want to be a Keeper in the first place, and I'm not going to do anything bad."

The Baron laughed in her face. "Now that's a good joke! You should have become a jester rather than am evil blight upon the face of the world!"

"I'm serious! Can't I just pay taxes on the land I'm using, and you leave me alone?"

"Do you think I'm a fool? I will not have a Keeper defile my country, gathering power while I sit idly by doing nothing! Your evil ends today!"

Ami sighed. At least the try hadn't cost her anything. "Looks as if I have no choice, then," she said. The knights shifted nervously on their mounts. "I surrender. The dungeon is that way." she helpfully extended a transparent arm and pointed into the forest, in the direction of the blighted land above her dungeon.

"You are expecting us to believe that you are *giving up*?" the Baron asked, voice dripping with disbelief, "I didn't come here all the way to not fight! Especially if there's a horned reaper afoot!"

"Has to be some kind of ruse or trap, my Lord," one of the knights murmured. Ami didn't miss that soldiers were trying to move through the bushes inconspicuously in order to surround her.

"It's not. I do not intent to waste time or resources on a battle I cannot win. The dungeon is empty except for the imprisoned ex-high priest of Murdrul and twenty recently freed slave girls who could use medical care. Also, the Reaper ran away," Ami added.

"You are not going to lull us into a false sense of security, fiend!" the Baron said, corners of his mouth lowering as he turned toward the abbot. "This has been a pointless waste of time. Remove that thing from my sight!"

The ice statue disappeared moments before a bolt of light from the sky smote the street where she had been standing. Ami had learned from Malleus that being in a possessed body when it died did bad things to one's ability to channel mana, one of the reasons why she had had so many difficulties with exhaustion when assaulting his dungeon.

Leopold took the escape with surprising calmness. "Well, that was anticlimactic. No ambushes, no spells, curses, or even foul language. It's as if she wasn't even trying. What manner of creature was that, anyway?"

"Some kind of golem, I assume," Durval responded, slinging his staff back over his bent back.

"Huh. Thought those were bigger. Did you sense anything useful from the Keeper while we were talking, Abbot?" The Baron still kept an eye on the surroundings, as if unwilling to believe that something horrible wouldn't be tearing its way out of the bushes any moment now.

"I'm afraid not. The Keeper's thoughts were in turmoil. Surprisingly enough, it appears that she was mostly honest, though she *does* intend to deceive us," the old mystic said, after careful consideration.

"I could have told you *that*," Leopold snorted. "Onwards, men! Today, a Keeper is going to be banished forever from this land!"

The talk could have gone better, Ami figured, but she wasn't feeling too disappointed. Her expectations had been low in the first place, and she had achieved what she set out to do. The women in her dungeon would have a shorter time to wait before someone rescued them, as the Baron would be obliged to at least check on her hint, which would necessarily lead to the discovery of the afflicted forest above her territory. She would have sent the girls to the surface already, but they seemed in too poor shape for the long walk to the village, having gotten no exercise chained to the walls in Malleus' dungeon, and some over-eager hero might mistake them for an enemy and shoot them. Aside from the anxiety about whether or not the intruders would find the hidden heart, Ami also had a bad feeling about something else she couldn't quite put a finger on. After a few moments of reflection, her glass-like eyes widened in realisation. "Tasbaal!" The connection linking him to her mind was no longer there. How had he done that without her noticing? Panicked, she teleported herself in front of his cell to see if she could still capture

him. What she didn't expect was the mob of enraged women, still in the process of chucking rocks at the mound of bloody and unmoving flesh toward the back of the cell. The former slaves let out startled squeals as she arrived in their midst, and Ami felt a stone bounce off of her frozen shell.

"What happened here? Why did you do that?" Sure, she had felt nothing but disgust for the evil monk after learning what he had been capable of, but being stoned to death was a horrible way to die, and she felt sick that it had happened while she was technically responsible for him. It was her fault for not anticipating that the abused women would be out for revenge, but she instinctively avoided thinking about them as much as possible to protect herself from the reactions their sight could evoke in her.

"That bastard deserved it!" one of the girls shouted, less intimidated than the others by the sudden appearance of the talking ice statue. She was somewhat pretty-looking, if emaciated, Ami noted. Looking at the girl also didn't cause any of the strange sensations that were so terrifying to her. Maybe being in a body of ice helped?

"But, but I wanted him to face a trial, not a lynch mob!" Ami shouted back.

"The monster killed our children! He deserves worse! I regret nothing!" Someone else shouted, outside of Ami's field of vision.

Well, what could one answer to something like that? "I'm sorry, I didn't know," she finally breathed, shoulders drooping. "Some heroes are on the way here, please avoid any threatening gestures. You should be free soon. I hope you can all get on with your lives somehow. I wish you the best of luck for the future." After these words, Ami disappeared, retreating to her dungeon heart hidden deep below the fake.

For a change, Ami's plan went off without a hitch. Soldiers cautiously entered the dungeon and encountered no resistance. When they found the freed slaves, the latter immediately surrendered when ordered to and were led toward the entrance that

the dwarves had dug. The abbot had a look at them, and his attitude changed from suspicious to chivalrous. There was only one dicey situation when the intruders destroyed the fake dungeon heart and Ami disconnected the real one, triggering the collapse of the dungeon heart chamber in the process. It looked for a moment as if three of the slower men-at arms would be crushed by a heavy slab of stone dropping from above, but Baron Leopold darted in and actually *caught* the massive rock, holding it up over his head like a body builder would a weight before tossing it aside. It gave his men time to escape the avalanche of dust and falling debris. Before Ami's claim on the land faded completely, she could see that the ground under the armoured noble's feet had cracked from absorbing the blow, and she felt a new respect for his strength. Her golems would have broken like matchsticks under an impact like that. What was his secret?

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Oh Gods!

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Three figures stood around a table, lit only by the white flicker above the staff held by the shortest one. They were casting long shadows that stretched out into the darkness veiling everything outside of the circle of light. Only partially illuminated stone pillars disappeared into the blackness above, giving the impression of extending into infinity.

"It is strange how an abandoned dungeon can be creepier than an inhabited one," the tall knight wearing a blue shawl around his shoulders muttered, eyes darting left and right. His voice echoed eerily through the darkened halls.

"A poignant illustration of how impressions can be deceiving, is it not, Sir Leon?" abbot Durval asked rhetorically, grey eyes peering at the map on the large table.

The Baron snorted, the metal of his gauntlets glittering as he stepped closer. "I don't like this. This was too easy! Durval, what do you think?"

The old man didn't hurry with his answer, and the lines on his forehead deepened in concentration "I think, Baron, this map may be more valuable than the few coins you found in this dungeon's vaults," he gestured him to lean closer, "it seems to be rather more accurate than the ones available to us, at least from what I can tell."

"Great. The Underworlders have better maps of our lands than we do, how reassuring." Leon was crossing his arms over his wide, armoured chest.

"Have *your* men found out anything useful?" the Baron asked, not in the mood to admire quality craftsmanship.

"Well, we did an extensive search of these tunnels, and it didn't take that long. It was a rather small dungeon. Aside from this throne room, there were only few other rooms, rather low quality all. The

most interesting of these were a burned out library, a few well-equipped bedrooms, and what looked like a laboratory. Other than that, there seemed to be nothing of value in this area, aside from the portal. We have already collapsed it, naturally."

"Good," the Baron nodded, the plume on top of his helmet mirroring the motion, "what about this lab?"

"It seems to have been used to develop that golem thing the Keeper showed up in," the soldier guessed, "we also found what looked like the equipment used by a horned reaper in one of the bedrooms. Too small for the monster by far, strangely enough. Do those demons have kids?"

The last was a question for the abbot, who looked up from his studies "we can only hope they don't," he muttered into his beard. "Didn't those poor girls you rescued know anything useful?"

Sir Leon shook his head "They had all just been moved here from another dungeon, at which point it had already been empty. Apparently, the local Keeper took them from someone called 'Malleus' and had no use for them, so she brought them here. Some said they thought that she was lying, due to the way she was looking at them. Ahem. I'm kind of surprised she didn't just kill them."

"Have them checked for plagues or other hidden nastiness," the Baron decided, "Malleus. His dungeon would have been around here?" His finger struck the surface of the map with a clanging sound close to the little red flag that was still sticking out of it in the desert area. He got a nod of confirmation. "Good riddance. These other red flags are more targets of Mercury, then?"

"Or a clever ruse left here to make us think so," the abbot sighed.

"Huh. This still leaves us with an unexplained dungeon in a poor location that serves no purpose, and a Keeper who refused to fight. Not that I'm complaining about not losing any men, and neither are they, but I'd like to have had more to show for all this effort than just a few coins of gold, a giant chicken head, and a lot of questions!" The Baron marched up and down, cape waving behind him. "Any ideas on what's going on here?"

"Well, my Lord, I have a few theories, none of them pleasant," Sir Leon began.

"Out with them! The less pleasant, the more likely, unfortunately."

"The relatively small size of the dungeon here indicates that the Keeper didn't intend to use it for long. She may have searched for something very specific and already recovered it, and thus had no more interest in this dungeon. It might also have been a hidden outpost to launch plots against the capital, except that Arachne pre-empted her."

"Worrisome, but likely. Go on," the Baron demanded.

"The last option I came up with is that this entire place is nothing but a distraction to draw your troops away. Wasteful, but if she is in thrall to another Keeper, she might not have had any choice."

"I think you are forgetting a possibility," the voice of Durval interrupted his musings. Both other men turned to look at the bent, wizened abbot. "She might have been saying the *truth*."

There was a long silence. "You aren't joking?" Sir Leon asked incredulously, "the idea of an unwilling Keeper is preposterous. Especially when we know she has a Reaper serving her. Besides, she is powerful enough to have taken out at least one other skilled Keeper, and to capture one of the high priests of the dark gods!"

"A *dead* dark god," the Baron corrected, "but even if it was true, it wouldn't change anything. Through becoming a Keeper, she lost her soul to the darkness, and nothing will be able to change that, peaceful intentions or no. For the safety of our world, destroying her is the only option."

"I am aware of that," the abbot nodded. "Tragic, but ultimately necessary."

"So what do we do about these other targets on this map, my Lord?" Sir Leon asked, drawing the older men's attention back to the decision-making process.

The Baron hesitated only for a moment. "They are outside our

borders. Send a warning to the local Lords. Even if Mercury isn't going to attack, they will need to know that a Keeper is lurking in the area. As for this location, have some of the mages take a closer look at it. If nothing else, they might find a weakness in these golems the Keeper is using. I want no stone left unturned."

"All right, this has gone on long enough!" Cathy stared angrily through her blonde bangs at the door blocking her passage. It wasn't as if the tall, iron door inlaid with rhombus-shaped panels had done anything to her. It was only blocking passage into the dungeon's library, which presumably contained not only books, but also the Keeper. "Mercury! Open up! We haven't seen or heard anything from you for nearly two days now!"

The portal continued looming in silence between the two thick marble pillars framing it, shimmering violet in the light of the large crystals forming the eyes of the snakes carved into their tops. Behind the swordswoman, a group of warlocks was shuffling backwards nervously, their long robes swishing over the immaculate floor tiles. Their desire to get back into the library warred with their self-preservation instinct that told them in no uncertain terms to not draw a Keeper's ire.

The crazy, provocatively-dressed blonde whom the new Keeper had brought along obviously had no such concerns. She stalked over to the group, let her gaze sweep over them, and then ripped the magic staff out of one's hands. The dark mage looked as if he wanted to object, but closed his mouth at her glare. He didn't particularly want to become an icicle like the bile demon who had attempted to "put the uppity new arrival in her place" earlier. Of course, it didn't help that she was now holding his staff, which, aside from its magical properties, was also a long, heavy lump of metal. With trepidation, he watched the woman jab the end of the dignified arcane instrument under the gap between door and floor and then use it as a crowbar. She must have been stronger than she looked, because with a loud creaking sound, one of the two door wings was pried open.

"Ha!" a kick widened the opening enough for Cathy to slip in. The

abused staff clattered to the floor, forgotten. The magic users stayed outside and waited. They hadn't reached their current positions by being reckless. It was better to let the impetuous youth absorb the fireballs than to rush in themselves.

"Mercury? Where are you?" The blonde found herself in a hall tall enough to match a two-story building, with bookshelves reaching up all the way to the ceiling. Wherever she looked, musty tomes blocked her way, forming alleys leading deeper into the maze. She could get lost in here! The blonde stopped to orient herself, and spotted a balcony running all along the walls at about half the room's height. It formed gangways protruding deeply into the library at points, and would make a much better vantage point to search for the elusive Keeper. Cathy ascended the creaking wooden stairs and searched for her quarry, stepping cautiously as she walked over the bumps in the lime-green carpet. Didn't these warlocks ever clean up after themselves? For a moment, her gaze lingered on one of the pedestals holding a glowing crystal skull. Tasteful. However, a better idea than having torches as light sources in here.

After going around another high shelf, Cathy finally found what she had been looking for. "Mercury?"

The girl was sitting with her back to the blonde on a chair in front of a table, a wall of open tomes stacked around her like fortress walls. Climbing over a pile of scrolls, Cathy approached and looked over Ami's shoulder. The girl was leaning forward, her chin resting on one hand, and looking wistfully into a crystal ball. It showed a somewhat recognisable scene: an oddly dressed woman standing before a blackboard talking to children, who were all sitting at small desks, taking notes. The boys were wearing dark blue trousers and matching shirts, all made of very expensive looking cloth. The girls were wearing something that resembled the outfit she and Mercury had on right now, but was of a more modest cut. She suddenly understood.

"Is this your home?" she asked, putting a hand on the shoulder of the homesick girl. This finally got a reaction, and Ami turned to look at her, nodding. The short-haired girl had dark rings under her eyes and looked as if she had cried again recently.

"Mercury! How long have you been staring at that? Have you even been eating anything?"

In response, Ami pointed at a half-eaten sandwich serving as a bookmark between the pages of a skull-encrusted tome. "Not for very long. It takes a lot more power to see something in my world than in local places," she said. Cathy didn't look very convinced. "No, really. I'm sorry for worrying you, but I'm not *just* sulking and going to pieces here," Ami attempted to joke. Her friends were all right, even if there was a bandage around Usagi's head, and just knowing that already made her feel better. She had also been strongly tempted to use the scrying device to follow her classes remotely, but unfortunately, her other duties took priority. Besides, the crystal ball didn't have audio. "What I'm working on here isn't meant for the eyes of the warlocks out there. Besides, I only got the crystal ball tuned correctly this morning. Unfortunately, there is nothing in this library that could help me get back," she sighed.

The blonde took a look at the diagrams on the open pages, which might as well have been written in a foreign language for all she understood. "Is this about dungeon hearts?"

Ami nodded again. "I have been going over the details of Malleus' knowledge again, and have come to the conclusion that there are inconsistencies regarding the war for the Avatar Islands. I cross-referenced it with some history books from here, and found out that at least two dungeon hearts were destroyed that belonged to the lord of the land, and I somehow doubt that they prayed to the dark gods for support."

"You think there's an alternative? That would be convenient," Cathy said, before her tone became angrier, "however, that's still no excuse to just disappear on us and lock yourself in the library! We were all getting worried, and you don't look as if you were getting enough food or sleep. Or baths, for that matter," the blonde moved away a bit further from Ami, grimacing.

The blue-haired girl blushed faintly. "Sorry, but I really needed some time alone to gather my thoughts and pull myself back together. This last week has been more stressful than anything I have ever gone through, and I just needed some distance. I'll join you in a bit when I

have investigat- ack!"

At this point, Ami found herself grabbed by her arm and bodily dragged away by the blonde. "Your research can wait. Clean yourself up and get some food! The books won't run away, and you'll be able to concentrate better when you aren't on the brink of collapse!"

Half an hour later, Ami was forced to agree with Cathy's assessment. She was soaking in a nice, hot bath in Malleus personal quarters. The square tub sparkled with white marble, and fragrant steam was rising from its waters, fogging up the mirrors on the sandstone-coloured walls. They had given her a good view of herself when she was undressing, the first time in a long while that she had really been able to just relax and take care of herself. Her appearance had reflected very little of the troubles she had gone through in the last week. She thought that she might have gained some muscle tone, and there was a nearly invisible discolouration on her belly where the Reaper's spear had impaled her, an injury she remembered with a slight shudder. The most drastic change had to be the eyes, she concluded. They were shining with red light most of the time now, even when she was completely calm. When at its faintest, the glow was still making her blue irises appear violet due to the colours mixing. She hoped that the effect wouldn't stick around when she got home. It wouldn't do for her eyes to glow like burning embers whenever she got angry or mildly irritated. Even if it would probably do a good job of keeping Usagi from goofing off when studying, she giggled. Sobering, she thought that she might have to start wearing sunglasses if she found no other solution for this complication.

Ami let herself sink deeper under the soapy bubbles until only her head, resting on her arms, was still poking out of the water, and then closed her eyes. The mirrors also had forced her to face something she had been trying desperately to avoid. But when the sight of her own naked body evoked the same reactions she had felt a while back with the harem slaves, there wasn't exactly anywhere she could flee to. So, with great reluctance, she had dared to explore this most disturbing aspect of what the dive into Malleus' deeply

corrupted mind might have done to her. Know the enemy and all that. To gain some sense of detachment, she attempted to dissect the facts logically. Ami blushed. First, to stop tiptoeing around the issue, she got aroused when confronted with the sight of attractive nude girls. Sometimes even if they were clothed, though that had only happened once, with one of Malleus' slaves. She had not had any such reaction to Cathy so far, for which she was very grateful. Second, Ami was pretty sure that she was supposed to be straight. Blushing deeper, she exercised her imagination. Yes. She definitely still liked boys. For scientific purposes, she repeated the thought experiment with women and found that, her body's inappropriate reactions notwithstanding, she wasn't attracted to females. Fantasising about being intimate with them just felt awkward, not exciting. Puzzled and somewhat relieved that the experience hadn't messed with her sexual orientation, she theorised about what exactly those unwanted reactions were.

Maybe they were more like a confused reflex or something like that. Ami intellectually knew that the memories weren't hers, but did her brain? Did it even care that the equipment in the memories was all wrong? If Ami could blush any deeper, she would have. Right now, her brain was working with several experiences of having a good time doing *that* with other girls, opposed by exactly zero of doing anything romantically-related with males. It probably didn't help a whole lot that the girls in the memories had been so slim that they had a boyish figure, either. Was it any wonder that her body made the wrong associations? There probably were hormones being pumped into her bloodstream too any time this confusion was triggered, further influencing brain chemistry and compounding the issue. Ami let out a long sigh. The problem with this theory was that she had no way to know if she was right or wrong, or how to fix it. The only ones who could possibly know enough about this topic to talk with any authority would be other Keepers. In the unlikely case that she could ever have that conversation, she would probably die from embarrassment alone before getting any useful results. Truth be told, she could think of one possibility how to fix this. Making her own, more appropriate memories. Ami caught sight of her face in the steamed mirror. Was a colour this red still healthy?

That reminded her, she really needed to scan herself properly one of

these days. There had been that contamination warning from the time the Reaper had possessed her body, and she also wanted to know if the times she had healed herself with necromancy didn't leave any lingering after-effects. She didn't feel any aches now, but it certainly wasn't a bad idea to check if that was going to pose any long-term problems. Ami lifted herself out of the water, feeling the cooler dungeon air cause goosebumps on her wet skin. She was sure that she had made some real progress now that she had dared confront her problem. If she knew what to expect, she could avoid freaking out, and it would be unreasonable to feel disgusted with herself over something she had no conscious control over. It was irritating and embarrassing, but something she could live with, if necessary. How often would she be around the stimuli that triggered this reaction, anyway?

She finished drying herself off and looked at her fuku, wrinkling her nose. How long had she been wearing the same one now? It could do with a wash. Normally, she would just transform again to replace it, but her new dungeon heart wasn't warded against spreading the uniform to all of her minions, and she was waiting for Snyder to develop a new warding scheme that wouldn't free uncontrollable wild magic. Thus, she had to find something else to wear, which was a refreshingly mundane problem. Did she have any female minions she could borrow something from? A quick search through her mental map of the dungeon revealed four of them, but the way they chose to dress caused her to avert her gaze quickly. Black leather, and very little of it, wasn't exactly what she was looking for. Maybe she could find something in her size in Malleus wardrobe, or at least adjust-Ami slapped her forehead. Nothing like that was necessary because she already knew a perfectly fine fabrication spell, which wasn't limited to only making golems.

"Hello Mercury, it's nice to see you have decided to rejoin the world of the living," Jered greeted the young Keeper.

Ami was tugging at her trousers to reduce the chafing. It seemed that the ability to just create her own clothing did not make up for a lack of experience and skill, and she would have to see a tailor later. Her current outfit was baggy by necessity, resembling a blue martial

arts gi held together with a belt. It made sense to wear something she could move well in, just in case Cathy had scheduled another training session. She inclined her head in the weasel-featured man's direction in greeting, cheeks colouring slightly. "Ah, yes. That wasn't too well thought out, was it?"

"Don't worry about it. Nothing that required your personal attention came up," the wavy-haired man leaned back in his chair, which was high-backed and thickly cushioned. Apparently, dark wizards liked to be comfortable when doing research. He certainly wasn't complaining and used a tome as thick as a coffer as footrest. "The troops' daily routine is the same as it was under Malleus, because you haven't made any disrupting changes yet. Well, except for the warlocks whom you kicked out of this library, but they are too fascinated by Boris to grumble much. I also had a look at the treasury, and I don't think you have to worry about money for a long time, unless there were to be unforeseen expenditures."

"I must say that this dungeon is a rather comfortable base of operations, all things considered. You should have a look at the kitchens, the food is amazing," Snyder praised. "I suppose it makes sense when one worships a god called the Devourer," the redhead continued. He was holding a thin booklet on holy magical items, though the text was more focused on defeating rather than constructing them.

Ami nodded an acknowledgement. She had not explored the dungeon herself much yet, as it frequently triggered memory flashes, even if they were becoming less intense with time. She turned to Cathy, who was sitting on the desk, in one of the few spaces not covered in books, and looking at the active crystal ball. "Is anything interesting going on?"

"Well, that Keeper in the northern mountains is dead. At least I found nothing but ruins and corpses when I checked that area," the blonde reported. "Our alternate target, the Keeper at the west coast, is still about and lying low for now."

Ami's eyebrows lowered as she frowned in concentration. "Thank you. Anything on the Reaper or Baron Leopold?"

The blonde shook her head. "The Reaper seems to have dropped off the face of the Earth, and the Baron is at a victory party, being undeservedly lauded as one of the great heroes of our time. Apparently, his latest expedition is being spun as the Keeper fleeing rather than having to face him," she added with a hint of irritation. She had no love for the man who had forced her and her fellow adventurers to become outlaws.

"I see." Ami thought some more. "Capturing that west coast dungeon heart might become necessary if I can't figure out how to make new ones without the dark gods' approval. It's close to the ocean, so it might be possible to load it on a ship and bring it to the Avatar Islands. Because I'm not going to just give up. If there is a way to be free of this dark taint, I will find it!"

"A ship? Won't it sink? Those dungeon hearts are rather big and heavy," Jered voiced some concern.

Ami dismissed it easily. "Ice floats, and I can make a large ship out of it. It will be a long journey around the continent, but transporting the heart by ship is the only way I can see of actually getting it across the ocean."

"It makes sense," Cathy agreed. "Will you be attacking the Keeper, then?"

Ami shook her head, opening the palmtop in front of her. "No, I want to learn more about my powers first before I try this. It wouldn't do to be caught unaware by some clause or other again, and I have a few ideas I need to test. However, I would be grateful if you continued to scry on the enemy and started coming up with a plan, Cathy. Jered too," she added.

"All right. I'd prefer it if you attacked now while he's still weak, but you are the Keeper. What about Snyder?" the swordswoman pointed her thumb at the acolyte, who was absently browsing the books.

Ami smiled. "He will be assisting me."

"I will?" the redhead looked up, his face betraying amazement. "I

mean, of course I will. What can I help you with?"

"Well, I figured that the heroes of Avatar Island who had dungeon hearts would not have prayed to the dark gods. But what about the good gods? You are an acolyte, that means you would know how to do so properly."

"Of course!" the redhead hesitated, "but, um, are you seriously considering praying to the Light? I mean, you are a Dungeon Keeper!" his eyes went wide when Ami frowned at him disapprovingly. "Erm, of course I didn't mean to say that you are evil, but you would have to go to a Good temple, where the gods can interfere directly with the world. And, well, they might not approve of your occupation, so you might not even get to state your case." He patted his forehead to dry the sweat that was forming on it.

Ami pondered this. "But they are good and fair?"

"Definitely," the acolyte confirmed.

"Then you'll just have to go first and announce me so they don't smite me on sight," she decided. "It's a risk I am willing to take. It could even clear all of your names."

Snyder hung his head and unfolded the map. "All right, if you insist. There should be a temple right here. News of our supposed treachery shouldn't have arrived there yet, here at the river bend..."

The destination that Snyder had picked was a town of around five-thousand inhabitants, going by the name of Evercalm. Like most cities, it was surrounded by a high wall, and its gates were closed for the night. Ami had arrived in her usual way of long distance travel, by possessing an ice golem and teleporting it across the land in many separate hops. Once in close vicinity to the sleepy town, she had hidden in a copse of trees nearby, and used the several minutes long flashy summoning spell to transport Snyder to her location. Above them, the moon sickle stood high in the sky, painting the countryside in grey tones with its light. Snyder had insisted on not trying this during the day in order to avoid scrutiny by the town guard

or alarmed citizens. Mercury's appearance was rather distinctive, and the temple's wards would inevitably alert someone to her presence, even if everything else went right.

The city wall loomed tall and impenetrable, providing an illusion of security to the citizens inside. None of them would have found anything strange with the fog billowing upward outside. Sure, it was unusual for the season, but not unheard of. Any observer would have been more alarmed by the two cloaked figures approaching through the mist, their footsteps muffled by the murk. The shorter of the two stopped in front of the wall and inclined her head backward as she looked up at the battlements. Had any guards be around to spot her, they would have seen two pinpricks of red under the face-concealing hood - and gotten a much more close-up view when the girl jumped impossibly high, putting a delicate foot down in an arrow slit, then leaping again from that foothold and alighting on top of the wall. Ami let down a long rope to Snyder waiting on the ground, who wrapped it around his waist while Ami tied the other end to a battlement, before pulling on the rope to help the redhead up. Gasping and wheezing, the man arrived on top and took off the grey cloak hiding his more noticeable red and white acolyte robes.

"That's the temple?" Ami asked, looking at the tall white building standing in a small park, separate from the rest of the quarter. The religious imagery, such as the winged angel statues standing to the left and right of the entrance, and the high central tower with an enormous bell in its top made the question somewhat moot, but Snyder looked so nervous that some conversation might calm him down.

"It is," he confirmed, inclining his head. "See those ponds on either side of the way leading to the entrance? Once you walk past those, you will be on sacred ground. I'd advise you to wait further away than that until I have prepared your arrival."

As the two walked closer next to each other, Ami could see that the temple had a central symmetry to it. The tower protruded from the middle of a high dome that had windows and alcoves for statues at half its height. Four smaller buildings with pointed gables projected

out in a cross pattern from that main structure. She and her companion were approaching the closest one, which had beautifully-carved wooden doors. An oppressive feeling was emanating from the structure, slowing Ami's steps down as she reached the point that Snyder had indicated. The young man gave her an encouraging nod and continued onwards, using the brazen knocker to announce his presence. While he stood under the arch formed by the wings of the angels framing the doorway, she let her gaze wander over the area. Beautifully kept rock gardens, ponds with fish to both sides of the road, and trees nearly as high as the secondary towers combined into a picture of harmony. And she got the distinct impression that all of this abhorred her presence.

The door opened, and she could see Snyder talk animatedly with someone inside. His backlit silhouette gestured several times in her direction, before he held up his palm, indicating that she should wait, and disappeared inside. A severe-looking man with a tonsure and robes that resembled the acolyte's, but had red switched for gold, took his place. The priest looked at her with interest, obviously trying to figure out what to make of the short, hooded figure with red dots for eyes. A short time passed, and Snyder returned to her side. "What did you tell the priest? Is it safe to go in now?"

"I told him you were someone from the Underworld, heavily ensnared in the machinations of the dark gods, who wants to convert to our side, and that I needed to pray to the Light to tell them that you mean no harm. If you want to go in, you can do so now."

Ami didn't want to go in. In fact, every cell of her body was screaming at her that this was a horrible idea and that she should run while she still could. Despite the feeling of being unwelcome, she gritted her teeth and put one foot before the other, slowly approaching the building, as if fighting against a strong gale. The pressure increased the closer she got to the doorstep, and once she had passed the temple's threshold, a searing sensation on her skin added to her discomfort. The interior of the temple was brightly lit. Too brightly for her to see much, and so she raised an arm to shield her eyes against the glare. She noted that neither Snyder nor the priest seemed inconvenienced.

"Tell me, young man," the cleric addressed the redhead as both

watched Mercury struggle to advance deeper into the temple, "would you know what kind of demon exactly taints her line?"

Snyder blinked. "I'm afraid I do not know what you are talking about?"

The priest shifted from one leg to the other. "To my magic, she registers as having demonic heritage. Faint, fourth or fifth generation perhaps, but it is there. It is admirable that someone with such inauspicious roots would seek to free herself from the hold of evil."

"That is news to me," the acolyte replied. "In any case, the only demons I am familiar with are bile demons and horned reapers, and neither seem inclined to produce half-human offspring, thank the Light." He was eyeing the warding runes cautiously, which were frosting over in Mercury's wake.

"Hah, yes. Thus my curiosity."

Both men fell silent and watched as the girl approached within a few steps of the altar.

"That is close enough, Keeper Mercury." The voice was neutral, neither male nor female, and seemed to come from everywhere at once. Ami found that she was standing in a small circle of darkness, while all around her, white light stretched into infinity. It was unbearably bright yet didn't sear her eyes. Because this was all happening in her head, she thought.

"You are correct. What is it that a Keeper risks coming into Our presence for?" the voice, or chorus, sounded mildly interested, but there was a hint of steel too, indicating that any lies would carry unfortunate consequences.

"I need your help! I'm not evil, and I never wanted to be a Keeper! Please don't turn me away." Ami pleaded her case.

"Truth," the voices replied, sounding surprised and also dismayed. Ami felt something touch her mind, accessing her memories of the event. *"That is tragic, child. However, Our options are limited. What do you wish Us to do?"*

"I cannot create new dungeon hearts without the aid of the dark gods, and I do not wish to commit evil just to gain their approval. Could you assist me with that instead, please?" Ami held her breath, waiting for the reply.

"You ask for the impossible. Your soul is in the realm of the dark gods, anchored to the human world with the devices you call 'dungeon hearts', and forming a conduit through which their corrupt power flows into the land and increases their hold on it. You could not use one infused with Our power, even if such a thing existed."

Hopes dashed and deeply disturbed at the independent confirmation of the Reaper's information, Ami was sounding panicky now *"What? Can't you get it back somehow? I never intended to worship the dark gods! I literally didn't know what I was doing!"*

"We cannot directly affect the realm of the dark gods, same as they cannot affect Ours. If We could help you, We would. Alas, We are powerless in this case. All We can do is offer advice." there was real pity in the chorus now.

"Advice?"

"The only way to get your soul back is by convincing the evil deity holding it to return it to you. Before you ask, We do not know how. Their motivations are impenetrable to Us."

"Oh. Wait! How do I find out which one has it?" Ami asked. Her situation was worse than she had imagined.

"It is currently in limbo, waiting to be snatched up by whomever wants it at the time of your death. However, should you choose to worship a specific dark god, it will go to that one at once."

Ami thought about this for a moment. *"A-are* you *encouraging me to worship a dark god?"* she asked, incredulously.

"It is the wrong thing to do, but your only chance at salvation."

"Oh, great. You aren't making things easier for me." she was starting to get angry at the non-committing answers.

"Would you prefer for Us to deceive you in order to ease your mind?"

Ami didn't reply.

"Why do you even wish to create additional dungeon hearts, child? We can offer you sanctuary in a monastery, with a single heart shielded by Our power so it cannot do harm nor be harmed. You would be doomed to walk this world forever, but it would be a preferable alternative to what awaits you after your death."

"I need to find a way back to my own world, and I want to destroy as many evil Keepers as I can while I search for the means that will return me home. And I don't want to die and go to hell. Wait, would you be able to send me home? Ami asked, feeling hopeful.

"We could, but We will not," the Light answered, *"You must* never *return to your own world."*

"What? Why not? My friends need me!" Ami's tone was hostile and desperate now.

"You would remain a conduit for the dark gods, and We will not allow them to taint another world if We can prevent it. We will not risk the souls of billions for the good of one."

"But my world is already under attack by evil! I have *to go back! Please!"*

"We can see that nothing We say will sway you. So be it. You have come in good faith, and it is not in Our nature to pay back trust with betrayal. Thus, go safely, but know that We will oppose your efforts if you continue on your chosen path. In a conciliatory tone, the voices added *"Our offer of sanctuary remains open, if you will just see reason. A final word of warning: your direct contact with Us has burned out your Keeper powers for the next few hours. Farewell, Mercury."*

Ami was suddenly aware of her surroundings again, and found herself slowly pushed backward, her feet gliding over the floor with little traction. The irresistible force moved her faster and faster, and

she slid past the two astonished holy men, waving her arms for balance. Once she was out of the door, both the force and the effect making her soles slippery disappeared, but not her momentum, and she landed hard on her behind. "Ouch!" In a testament to how much this conversation had rattled her composure, she added "Jerks!"

"Mercury! Are you all right?" Snyder was already running toward her, looking worried.

A bright orange flash from beyond the temple grounds caused everyone to turn around. At the end of the straight path between the ponds, a rotating pillar of flame blazed into the sky, its light colouring the surroundings as if they were drenched in blood. Out of the conflagration stepped a familiar, muscular and horned figure.

"So we meet again, Mercury," the Reaper laughed. "What you just tried has *really* annoyed the Dark Gods, and they want to see you. *Right now.*" the beast's fanged grin widened, and his scythe appeared, whooshing threateningly through the air as he stomped forward slowly, "Guess who gets to send you to them?"

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Reaper Battle, Take Two

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Ami jumped to her feet, dropping into a combat stance as the Reaper approached. The oppositely-aligned magic radiating out of the temple gates behind her exerted a mild repulsive force. No help from that side, at least for her. "Snyder! Get in there!" she shouted, waving with her left hand toward the open doors.

"But-" the redhead hesitated, taking a step backwards.

"NOW!" That finally got the desired direction, and she watched him hurry toward the building's interior. The priest was staring at the approaching demon, face pale and mouth agape. Snyder grabbed his sleeve and pulled him inside as he passed. "Don't just stand there! Wake the other monks! Sound the bells!"

Each of the Reaper's steps caused the surface of the ponds to vibrate as he stomped forward, scythe raised high and confident in his victory. "You can't run this time, you pathetic little worm! I *will* have your head!" The monster broke into a run.

"How rude!" Ami's heart was beating rapidly, and her lips were merely a thin, determined line as she concentrated on getting out of the situation alive. Behind the Reaper, the pillar of flame he had arrived in faded in intensity as the wind blew it apart, but it was still bright enough to illuminate the small park around the temple of the Light. The senshi's thoughts were racing. She didn't have her Keeper powers, which meant that she had no way to rapidly move herself around by possessing her creatures. Not that this method would have worked in the first place, as the city was not unclaimed territory, but it would have been nice to get out if things went wrong. Ami's reflections were cut short by the need to act as the looming form of her opponent barrelled down on her, mouth twisted into a vicious snarl.

Ami ripped off her cloak and dodged backward, throwing the grey garment over her opponent. She heard a whistling sound and felt

cold metal graze her skin just below her right armpit. The scythe had passed underneath the arm still lifted from her throw, horizontally bisecting the floating cloak. Ami stumbled, but was fortunate enough that the upper half of the fabric hit its intended target, and the glowing yellow orbs set into the Reaper's face disappeared under the cloth. Even blinded, the monster continued its charge, lowering his head like a rampaging steer. The tactic would work too, Ami realised, if he slammed into her and trampled her under these bucket-sized armoured hooves! He was too wide and too close already to jump aside, so she did the only thing she could do, and ducked low. A desperate lunge forward, aimed at the gap between his moving legs, carried her behind him, but not before her thighs collided with the hard metal of the greaves covering the demon's knees. The Reaper, having expected a much harder impact, slowed down and brushed the annoying rag covering his face aside, twisting his barrel-like torso as his hooves skidded over the pathway.

Ami ignored the bruises already forming on her leg, only acknowledging the pain with a soft grunt. She had landed on her hands and knees, but couldn't afford to waste time on getting up. Instead, she kicked backward like a horse, her feet striking the enemy hard in the small of his back. Shapely legs that enabled improbably long senshi jumps extended and pushed against the beast's scaled back. As Ami was braced against the ground, she didn't move. The Reaper, however, was already going in the right direction. Despite being several times the weight of the slender girl, he was lifted a few centimetres off the ground and propelled onwards on a rather flat trajectory that carried him toward the temple's entrance. His eyes went wide in surprise, but he wasn't one of the most feared creatures in the world for nothing. The blade of his weapon flashed downward, letting out a metallic screech as it plunged into the ground. It trailed sparks as it ploughed through the stone, slowing down the demon holding on to it like an anchor. The manoeuvre prevented his bulky form from tumbling inside the sacred building, but he still stumbled when landing, which forced him to put his right leg over the threshold. Immediately, white light engulfed the limb, and dirty yellowish flames shot out from cracks that opened in the scaled skin. With a hiss of pain, the monster jerked the foot back into safety, eyes glowing amber in anger. With the same turning motion, he pointed his scythe at Ami, launching a ball of flame in her

direction. The girl had already changed location and was circling to the left. Long lines of shadow centred on the fireball flitted over the courtyard as the projectile blazed forward. In its light, the wet red stain marring the blue fabric of Ami's gi was clearly visible for a moment, and then the fiery spell struck the left pond like a cannonball. Water fountained up in a high column, and sizzling steam spread from the impact point. The smell of boiling algea mixed with the stench of burnt sulphur into a nauseating concoction.

"Shabon Spray!"

Shielded from sight, Ami used the moment of reprieve to use her first and weakest attack. The already dark park became just a bit dimmer as the whitish fog blanketed out the light of the moon sickle in the sky above. The Reaper laughed humourlessly, his nose ring shaking from the movement. "Oh no. Fog. Whatever will I do now?" His scythe swung to the side, and another fireball whooshed from its tip, turning the bushes and trees where Ami had just been standing into a blazing conflagration.

"Eeep!" the blue-haired girl darted aside, wondering how he had managed to see through the magic.

"Did you really think the Dark Gods would send a hunter without a way to sense his prey?" the demon's growl mocked. Already, he was running in her direction, fast despite the injury to his leg. Above, the bell in the tower was starting to ring, sending deep brazen tones through the sleeping streets.

"Shabon Spray Freezing!" The blast of freezing bubbles shot toward the Reaper, who swerved to the side, ripping up the lawn with his hooves as he threw his heavy mass aside. Ami nearly went to her knees, so unexpected was the drain from using the spell. With blurring vision and feeling woozy, she hurried out of her current position, running toward the temple amidst a rain of burning leaves. Her heart was beating even faster now , and her hands were feeling clammy. Without the Keeper powers, even her senshi attack seemed diminished, and she was scared as never before, now that she knew what dying would mean for her. Getting to the temple seemed like her best hope for survival, even if she could feel the holy power radiating from it hindering her even now. Behind her, a

burning tree crashed to the ground as the Reaper hacked it down with a single swing instead of going around it.

Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw movement from the open temple doors. The priest she had seen earlier stood in front of the lit doorway, rearing back his arm. Something glittering flew in a long arc and landed behind her. The footsteps of the Reaper that had been getting closer and closer stopped. Still running, Ami risked a glance back over her shoulder, just in time to see the demon tear through a warding that had formed a transparent, golden cylinder around him. With a grateful nod in the man's direction, Ami continued sprinting toward the structure ahead. Within the building, she could hear muffled shouts as people started to wake up. She would have been safe within, if she had only been able to reach it in time. Unfortunately, advancing against the intrinsically hostile flow of holy power from inside was like swimming against a stream in that it required a lot of strength, and the Reaper was stronger than her and would catch up before she was out of reach of that scythe of his. Not an option. She reached the white-painted wall of the temple. A larger-than-life statue of an angel was kneeling right next to her position, and she hopped on top of its head and from there onto the inclined roof of one of the four side aisles protruding from the central dome.

Against her hopes, the Reaper wasn't deterred by the possibility of falling through the roof and to his doom inside the temple. She leaned backward against the shingled roof to let another fireball pass. It roared past overhead, radiating searing heat, and continued onwards into the night sky until it looked like yet another star. The red demon followed the senshi's path, though the statue's head shattered under his weight. With a great bound, the monster landed on top of the aisle's gable, sending a spray of shards clattering to the floor from his landing point. Ami was already running clockwise over the central dome, hoping to get its curvature between herself and the enemy. She rushed past alcoves and stained glass windows, formulating the beginnings of a plan, and ducked behind the figurine of some unknown saint riding a lion, barely able to make out the stomps of her pursuer over the din made by the huge bell in the tower above.

The Reaper didn't bother with slowing down to climb past statues or other such obstructions. Anything in his path was roughly shoved out of the way, and masonry plummeted from the roof to burst on the ground as he stalked his prey. Ah, there she was, that mop of blue hair behind the pompous rider statue had to be her. He charged, not noticing the slick sheen on the surface ahead before his hooves lost traction and slid out from under him. He attempted to stop his slide off the domed roof, and his hand gripped into the same grease that had caused the initial fall. With an angry roar, he fell off the edge off the roof, into the fog wafting below. Ami let out a breath of relief when she heard the thud that signalled his impact on the lawn below. She was fortunate that her fabrication charm was just a learned magical spell, rather than relying on the power of the dungeon heart. With a grunt of effort, she leaned with her back against the lion rider statue, pushing with her feet against the ascending curve of the roof. Under her efforts, the stone shuddered, then moved with a grinding noise, and finally toppled over the edge. An angry bellow from below informed her that it had hit the intended target.

Cautiously, she peeked down, revealing no more than the top of her head and her eyes as she looked over the brim. They widened when she saw that the pile of rubble was already moving, and the Reaper pulled himself out of it, baring his teeth at her. What did it take to put that thing down? Ami disappeared from his sight, continuing her flight. She could see sleepy-looking people arriving at the outskirts of the temple grounds, gesticulating excitedly at the fires, and felt like screaming at them to get away. They wouldn't have heard her over the noise of the chiming bell, though. Hmm.

A large piece of rubble that she identified as having belonged to the rider statue approached in a ballistic arc, impacting a jutting structure above her. It collapsed into an avalanche of tiles and fast-moving stones that intersected her path. She tried to jump out of the way, but one of the larger rolling pieces moving inside the dust cloud struck her shins, toppling her. She had to hold on tight to avoid being swept off the roof even as she was being pelted with debris. Darn it! How had the monster aimed that? He didn't even have line of sight! With quick but cautious movements, she started to climb out of the pile of shifting debris. One wrong move and it could

resume its downward slide, taking her along. The stone dust getting into the cut in her side burnt like salt in the wound. Where was the Reaper? Spotting movement above, she looked up. To her great relief, the moving spot of red was not the monster's skin, but the bowl cut belonging to Snyder. He was holding a stoppered amphora in his arms and mouthing something at her, but she couldn't understand him over the ringing bell. He was gesturing downwards in her direction, though.

Ami cleared the last of the difficult terrain and gazed in the indicated direction. Some of the observers at the other end of the ground were pointing at her now with wonder or fright, having spotted the veil of dust fanning out from the landslide-like avalanche. Snyder's gesticulating became more frantic, and he tossed the amphora toward her, but his aim was off, and she had to jump after it to catch it. Barely after closing her hands around it, something large and crimson shot up from the dead angle directly next to the wall, and a scythe strike vertically parted the roof where she had just been standing. The senshi nearly lost her grip on the liquid-filled container from the surprise. Had the Reaper just jumped all the way from the ground up here in a single bound? He left her no time to be amazed. Kicking sideways even before he ripped his weapon from where it was lodged, he swept the legs out from under her, and pain blossomed in the back of her head as it struck the roof tiles. Dazed, she looked up as the monster stepped over her, lips pulled up in a satisfied grin.

"And so it ends," he stated. The scythe whistled toward her neck.

Cringing, Ami reflexively raised the amphora she was holding into the path of the blade. She held little illusion that the flimsy ceramic could stand up to the weapon, but it was better than just giving up. A scraping sound, and then a spray of liquid and shards splashed over her. To her surprise, it was cold, not warm like her own blood would be. Opening the eyes she hadn't known she had closed, she saw that the Reaper was staggering backward, unbalanced and dumbfounded by the sudden dissolution of his weapon into orange sparks. Oh, this amphora must have held the magical-item suppressing water that Snyder had once used on her, and the demon conjured his equipment! Recovering faster from the surprise

than the monster, she sat up and reached forward, touching one of his hooves with one hand each. A mental picture and a quick focusing of mana, and she had fabricated two iron manacled around his ankles, connected by a thick chain. Ami threw herself aside, and an angry red fist cracked the roof tiles where she had just sat. Scrambling away from the monstrosity, Ami nevertheless had the presence of mind to continue using her fabrication spell as fast as her influx of mana allowed. A second chain, attached to the one tying the Reaper's legs together, rested between her hands, growing in length as she ran upward on the dome, toward the tower in its centre, where the swinging bell was producing a noise loud enough to make her bones and teeth vibrate.

The cold air and the weights bouncing on her chest reminded her uncomfortably of the fact that she too had been wearing conjured equipment when the enchanted water had drenched her. The keyword being *had*, she thought with chagrin. However, trying to create clothing on her own body while she was running and jumping was inviting disaster. Staying alive was more important than fixing that problem right now. If she survived this, she would have enough time to feel mortified, she told herself with a blush. Behind her, the air flashed orange. The Reaper had just replaced his scythe. She had to step aside when another fireball rushed in her direction. It struck the bell, which was taller than even the horned reaper, and chimed like a gong under the blow. The sudden flare of the spellfire washing around the metal made Ami's pale silhouette stand out brightly against the darkness of the night sky, right next to the tower. The Reaper started hacking at the shackles restricting his movement, making sparks fly when the blade struck the thumb-thick links of the chain. He looked irritated rather than worried by the girl's efforts. This suited her quite well. She stopped elongating the chain in her hands, and instead focused on creating an arm-thick bar of metal. It went in through one window of the bell tower and out another, then circled back to the first one and out the second again so that it was wound solidly around the masonry. Then, the bar elongated and grew up vertically like an flagpole, until its top projected higher than the pointed tip of the tower. The metal looped once at the top, looking like the world's largest needle, complete with an eye in it.

If the Reaper was intrigued by her actions, he hid it behind shooting another ball of flame at her, which was side-stepped easily at this distance, even if its light exposed her for everyone who was looking up. No, focus! Ami threw the end of the chain. It went through the opening at the top of the pole. She caught it as it came back down, then approached the giant bell and attached the chain to it. At this point, the Reaper's expression went from irritated to alarmed as he finally realised what she was planning. This close, the bell's noise was near-deafening. The large cast-iron shape was hanging from a thick, wooden rail. Silently pleading the gods for forgiveness for the act of vandalism she was about to commit, Ami added some sawtooths to the inside of the ring the bell was hanging from. Now, it bit deeply into the bar holding it with each swing, and sawdust trickled to the sides. The blue-haired girl backed away, bringing the bulk of the tower between herself and her enemy. Now that all she had to do was wait, she quickly called on her magic to cover herself.

She had just finished the underwear when the weakened wood broke at the apex of the bell's swing. The huge instrument, carried by its own momentum, flew out of the tower, struck the cupola of the temple with an unprecedentedly loud ringing, and rolled down the increasingly steep slope. It caused an unbelievable amount of noise on its way to the ground and left an unroofed path in its wake. The chain attached to it went taut. The Reaper attached to the chain was ripped off his feet. As the bell bounced down the roof, the monster bounced upward, pulled by the weight attached to the other end of his shackles. "Oh, damn it all!" The bell struck the ground. The demon was tugged bodily into the air and swung upside down from the pole above the tower, like the world's ugliest red flag. He had even lost his scythe on the way up and raged, his voice echoing loudly in the sudden "Rargh! You will pay for this, Mercury! You will be the first victim I torture rather than slay! I still remember how delicate your body is from being in it! You will-"

Ami stepped out from behind her shelter and put an end to his tirade with three well-chosen words. "Shabon. Spray. Freezing." The additional exertion and stress from casting the spell, combined with the damage taken from the battle, was too much, and she fainted.

Ami's eyes opened. She was lying on her back, there was a wooden ceiling overhead, and she was covered by a warm blanket. She had also been expertly healed and felt none of the pain of her recent injuries. Through the barred window, she could see the colours of the sky take on the reddish purple tones of dawn just before sunrise. Wait, bars? She sat up, noting that she was wearing a drab grey smock, and looked around. Yes, she was on a pallet in a cell, one that was dusty from lack of use. The large magical ward inscribed into its centre seemed new, though. Its symbols reminded her of the amulet that she had been forced to wear in order to suppress her magic. A quick check on the status of her Keeper powers reassured her that she could leave whenever she wanted, so she didn't feel too worried. She quickly located Snyder, who was sleeping and unharmed.

"Oh, good, you are awake!" the voice belonged to a young woman in purple and white armour that looked more ceremonial than practical. Town guard, probably. "Did you really defeat a horned reaper on top of the temple? That is so cool! I- " she fell silent when Ami turned in her direction with eyes like pits of burning lava. "Err..." the girl backed away. "Charly! Edgar! The prisoner is awake!"

"About time," a gruff voice from down the corridor answered, and heavy footsteps approached. A portly man, too well-fed for his armour, trotted into view, holding a quill and a notepad. A younger man with his face full of freckles, who was also in uniform, preceded him and nearly bounced with energy. The family resemblance to the girl was unmistakable.

"Good morning. Um, why am I locked up?" Ami asked, keeping her voice polite.

"Well, you caused quite a ruckus this night, and the Mayor wants to know what exactly happened, so you are here for questioning. We can't have strange happenings without knowing what's going on, right? Besides, with all due respect, you are kind of creepy-looking. Father Barnas tells me that's probably not your fault, what with having some demon blood, but still. Those eyes... Ahem."

"I don't think you were supposed to tell her all that before asking questions, Charly," the boy said. "And ask her name first,"

"Sailor Mercury," Ami supplied, and the female member of the watch noted it down, but gave her an odd look.

"Oh, screw protocol. We don't get enough suspects to make memorising it worth the effort," the red-faced Charly replied. "Anyway," he refocused his attention on Ami, "there's a bunch of crimes you could possibly be charged with, though I doubt anyone would want to actually put you to trial for them after you saved the city from that monster. So don't worry."

"Crimes?"

"Well, there's unauthorised entry into the city."

Ami winced and nodded. She couldn't argue with that.

"Disturbance of the peace at night," the man continued reading from his list.

"That wasn't really my intention," she replied, folding her hands in her lap.

"Large amounts of property damage."

"I can pay for the repairs." Technically, it was her fault that the Reaper had shown up here instead of elsewhere. Besides, she could afford it, and having the gods of the good side angry at her instead of just antagonistic wouldn't do her any favours.

The man raised an eyebrow at the next item. "Indecent exposure."

Ami blushed and looked down "My clothing got damaged during the battle."

"Disfigurement of a holy site."

"Sorry, isn't that covered by the property damage one?" Ami asked, blinking.

"No, that would be your addition to the bell tower. The priests haven't figured out how to safely get the monster on top down yet without it getting loose and killing everyone."

"Oh. I will deal with that later," the senshi offered.

"Good, good. Oh, and here we have," he squinted a bit at the paper, and his voice sounded strangled as he blushed "One suspected incident of b-bestiality."

"WHAT?!" Ami gaped like a fish.

The three watchmen around the cell were all beet red, and the younger one explained "W-well, the demon ranted something about b-being 'in you'..."

"Wait, didn't Father Barnas say that the thing was most likely the progenitor of her line? Wouldn't that also make it inces-?"

"NOTHING LIKE THAT HAPPENED!" Ami shouted, blushing to the roots of her hair. "He meant possession! POSSESSION! Nothing else!"

"Oh, that's good. Err, I mean, it's not good, but- Argh, you know what I mean!"

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Corruption? (DARK)

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Ami sat on the bed in her cell, with a steaming bowl of soup on a tablet that rested on her thighs. The viscous pulp of mashed beans and sausage tasted very differently from what she was used to, and while it wasn't bad, its spiciness brought tears to her eyes. Nevertheless, she had been getting sick of chicken, and so it was a welcome change. Putting the spoon down, she couldn't help but feel like an animal on display in the zoo. Curious townsfolk was milling about outside the guardhouse, trying to peek in through the window, and it was hard to keep one's appetite while being gawked at.

From time to time, Ami could overhear some snippets of conversation.

"... heard they exchanged blows so powerful that a missed one dislodged the huge temple bell!"

Just great, the rumour mill was already distorting the events of the night beyond all recognition. At least this was somewhat flattering.

"...no, I heard ... was there ... exploited secret weakness by taking off all her clothes..."

Ami choked on her soup, blushed, and hid her face in her hands. That wasn't what had happened at all! She resisted turning around to see who had said that. Looking at the bright side, she wasn't planning to stick around for long, so any damage to her reputation was somewhat meaningless.

"...grandpa says... staged ... was a hero you know... couldn't have defeated the reaper ... evil plot ..."

Shaking her head in disbelief, Ami finished off her meal. She didn't understand how anyone could reach that conclusion, or how they'd even gotten the idea that she'd gain anything from a convoluted plan like that. At least those crazies were just a tiny minority, the general

tone of the murmuring outside sounded more like awed curiosity.

Her thoughts went back to the horned reaper and to her own precarious situation. She could probably destroy him for good, if she got him into the temple. However, she needed answers from him first. How was he tracking her even when he couldn't see her? Were the dark gods feeding him information directly, or was there something else she was missing? She needed to get him back to her dungeon to get some intelligence on his employers out of him. What would they try next, now that their assassination attempt had failed? The girl sighed and put away the tablet and empty dish. For all she knew, her mere presence endangered everyone in this town. It would have been so nice to spend some time among normal folk again, too, but she just couldn't risk staying around for too long.

"Sailor Mercury? The Mayor and other officials are here," the young, freckled guard appeared at the cell door, and she heard keys rattle. The rarely-used gate opened with a squeak, and she could see the three watchmen who had questioned her earlier standing in the open frame. The female one stepped forward, holding up some chains and looking apologetic. A golden medal, mirroring the magic-sucking ward on the ground, jingled on the restraints.

"Sorry about this, but it's the law," the woman looked slightly embarrassed.

Ami just held up her wrists resignedly. It wasn't as if she couldn't simply turn into a shadow and possess the ice golem hidden outside of the city if she needed to get away. "So, what's going to happen now?" she asked while walking down the corridor between the armoured figures, taking note that all other cells were empty.

"Oh, it's just a formality," the heavily-built oldest guard replied with a dismissive wave of his hand, "just a hearing to make sure you mean no harm to the city, and then you'll be free to go." His steps sounded hollow on the wooden stairs. "Though we would appreciate it if you did something about that demon. The ice's thawing something fierce in the morning sun."

Before she could inquire how the proceedings were going to work, the door at the top of the stairs opened, and she was led into what

looked like a large courtroom. Behind the high wooden podium in the middle sat a wrinkly man who could only be the judge. Powder was trickling down from his white, curly wig onto the hammer resting before him as he leaned forward, looking Ami up and down. The scribe sitting at a low desk to his left paused sharpening his quill and did the same. Ami stopped to look around. The wooden benches lined up for the public were thankfully empty, and there weren't many guards. Only two standing with halberds at the door, looking sharp in their purple and white armour, and the three who had escorted her in from the cell block. On the right side of the room, directly against the wall, stood a row of large and more comfortable chairs, most likely reserved for dignitaries. Such as the large, portly man talking animatedly to one of the temple priests sitting next to him. That must be the Mayor, Ami figured from the heavy gold chain around his neck, the ermine pelt collar, and the magenta silk jacket. With his thick, round glasses and the near-absence of a neck, he reminded her of an owl. The official's opulent outfit contrasted starkly with the drab grey dress she was wearing. She looked down at herself. At least its baggy, sack-like cut was about as modest as you could get, so she would be spared further embarrassment.

The guard behind her gave her a gentle shove. "Step forward onto the magical circle in front of the bench, please." She ordered, tone all business now that they were in the presence of superiors.

Ami looked at the strange design on the ground that took up the middle of the free area in front of the judge. Its white lines formed a many-pointed star, but the exact details seemed to slip away whenever she tried to get a good look at it. Her visor would have been really useful now. Warily, she stopped before her sandals touched the tip of the closest line. "Excuse me, what does this do? Is it safe?"

"Perfectly so," the priest answered from the right side of the room. "Its holy pattern does nothing but evaluate the truthfulness of the speaker." Seeing the reluctance on her face, he stood up and walked over it, his long robes with the golden seams obscuring part of the lines. "See? Completely harmless." The design pulsed once in a green tone after his statement. "This magic is a gift from the Light, so I doubt you would know it from the Underworld."

Ami shook her head and waited for the man to return to his place. The arcane star in front of her faintly radiated the power she had encountered in the temple. A truth detector? Well, she didn't have anything to hide, aside from being a Keeper, and they'd have to ask her about that flat out to catch her in a lie. She might as well humour them. She had enough enemies already without being overly confrontational. As she stepped in the centre of the design, she idly wondered whether Snyder would be able to make something like that for her dungeon. A quick mental check revealed that he was still fast asleep somewhere.

"Ah, you must be Sailor Mercury," the well-dressed man who could only be the Mayor said loudly, prompting the hushed conversations in the room to die down as people focused their attention on either the prisoner or the speaker. He paused for a moment as he looked the girl over. "*You* defeated the horned reaper? I had expected someone taller. Or at least older."

"I did." Ami inclined her head lightly, which incidentally gave her a good view of the lines underneath her feet flashing green, confirming what she had said.

"Great!" the Mayor took a moment to read the scroll lying on top of his desk. His eyebrows went up as he got toward the end, and the naturally red colour of his cheeks deepened slightly. "Ahem. Let's get straight to the point. Can you safely get rid of that frozen demon for us?"

Ami nodded quickly. "Yes. I will do so as soon as possible."

Seeing the green glow on the ground, the large man smiled. "Good, good. If you do, we will drop all the charges against you. Provided we can verify now that you mean no harm to anyone here, of course. Does that sound acceptable to you?"

Not a bad offer at all for something she had intended to do anyway, even if none of the battle damage had been her intention in the first place. "Perfectly so, thank you."

"Very well, then let us get the formalities out of the way. Honoured Judge, she's all yours."

Ami turned to face the bench. In the polished wood, she could see a faint reflection of her red-glowing eyes before she met the gaze of the large-nosed man, who was sitting up straighter and clearing his throat, one dainty fist held in front of his mouth. "Sailor Mercury. Are you plotting or involved in a plot that would bring harm against this city, or anybody in it?"

The girl shook her head. "No, I am not." The lines on the ground flashed red, prompting some furrowed brows and whispered exchanges from the attenders. Ami paled a little, startled. If the truth magic was malfunctioning, then- her eyes widened in realisation. Hastily she added "With the exception of the Reaper, of course!"

The tension drained from the room when the network of lines changed from red to green. "Noted," the wig-wearing judge confirmed, before continuing "Are you responsible for any unresolved crimes within this city?"

"No."

The judge checked off another item on his list. "For what reason did you come to here, sneaking in at night?"

"I wanted to ask the Light gods for help, and was afraid my appearance would cause undue attention. I have had that problem before. I meant no harm." Ami replied, with the magic confirming her truthfulness.

"Did you omit anything from that answer?" the questioning continued. After Ami denied this, the man looked at his list again, apparently deciding to ask one that was not on it. "Why do you look like this, anyway? Is this your true form?"

Was this her true form? Not really, she was still transformed into Sailor Mercury, but how to phrase that without alarming everyone? "Not exactly, but I'm human, and my true form looks nearly the same as this." She hoped that wouldn't cause any more difficulties.

As expected, there was some murmuring at the answer. This time, the Mayor asked "Why are you hiding your identity, then?"

"It is an inbuilt feature of the enchantments I use, but I had nothing to do with creating the disguise function." Ami quickly tried to assuage his worries.

"Disguise function? What was your role in the Underworld, anyway?" the answer seemed to have had the opposite reaction.

Oh dear, this was quickly going into a direction she wanted to avoid. "Look, you already know I mean no harm. Does it really matter what I did before?"

"It does when it is a potential danger to my city! Now answer the question!" the Mayor had to push his glasses back up to the bridge of his nose after his outburst had nearly shaken them off.

Ami wondered what she should do. The people here had been relatively nice and easy-going so far, even in light of her supposed demonic heritage, but she doubted they would take the revelation that she was a Dungeon Keeper well. With a sigh, she hung her head before answering. "Sorry, but I refuse. Please keep in mind that I really have no ill intentions, and that you still want me to remove a horned reaper from the temple's premises."

Unhappy grumbling filled the room after . Ami could hear quick footsteps behind her and turned to see the largest of the guards walk to the Mayor, pointing first at the list of charges, then at her as he had a hushed discussion with the official. She could see the man's eyebrows rise again during the course of the discussion, and his eyes widened a bit, as if understanding something. Finally, he looked to the patiently waiting girl. "Fine. Answer this question instead. Have you ever been, possessed by a demon?"

What brought that- oh, that must be related to that ridiculous 'bestiality' charge. Safe territory, as the Reaper had been possessing her body for a time. "Yes". The lines went red. Oh. Her *body*. She hadn't actually been in at at the time, so *she* technically hadn't been possessed. My, this magic was finicky.

Ami opened her mouth to correct her answer, but the Mayor was already speaking, blushing furiously. So were the guards who had first interrogated her. "Right. To spare the girl further

embarrassment, I shall retract my previous question."

What? What kind of conclusions had they jumped to now? Oh. A memory flash from Malleus provided an explanation, as it listed some of the more common female occupations in the Underworld. Ami went red at the implication. Interestingly, this memory had been less disconcerting than the ones she was used to, as if it was faded and blurred with age. Cautiously, as if probing an open wound, she tried to consciously focus on it. Yes, there it was, existing, but without most of the emotional impact that she had expected. Experimentally, she looked for one of the other more hurtful scenes. To her surprise, she could barely remember it, except in a very general sense. Other stress-inducing foreign memories seemed similarly dulled, which was an extremely convenient discovery, but it raised the question about how it had happened. It was too fast for the mind's self-healing capabilities, wasn't it? In any case, the townsfolk were getting the entirely wrong impression! Ami nearly blurted out a protest, but what could she say without inciting further questioning, which could only lead to the revelation that she was a Keeper? So Ami swallowed, looked at the floor and softly answered "Thank you."

The room fell silent for an awkward moment, before the judge cleared his throat once again. "Very well. In light of recent information, I deem this girl to not be a threat to the city. Bailiff, remove her chains!"

The morning sun stood low over the city wall as Ami walked through the streets, toward the temple. The earlier she got the demon out of here, the better. Dirty children were playing in the street, laughing and running about, but stopping to gape or point when they noticed her red-glowing eyes. The decidedly medieval smell of the city itself was offensive to her nose, and she noted with some concern that sanitation was poor, with people just dumping their waste into the streets from the windows of their framework houses. Despite this obvious lack of hygiene, all the people she met looked healthy and well-fed, maybe even more so than the people of Tokyo. She inquired about that to the priest accompanying her, and got a long-winded sermon about holy magic and the gifts of the gods to good

people.

Putting a few things together, she asked "Can they also heal damaged minds?" during a pause in the man's well-meaning, but repetitive exposition.

"Certainly. They can cure mental deficiencies and correct aberrant behaviour, be they inborn or acquired through an accident. They can also soothe the pain caused by certain unpleasant experiences." The bearded man looked down at the blue-haired girl walking to his right, his tone becoming more gentle. "Are you in need of such assistance?" he asked, having of course heard the embarrassing rumours that were even now spreading through the city like a wildfire. One of the attendees of the hearing must not have been able to keep his mouth shut.

Ami shook her head. "I think they might already have helped me with that when I was in the temple earlier," she said. She really should pay for the damages to the building, she thought. It would be ungrateful not to.

High above the temple's tower, the horned reaper was trapped in ice like a fly in amber. The icy prison was swinging slowly in the breeze, clanging against the metal pole it was suspended from as it glittered in the sunlight. Standing at the base of the empty bell tower, Ami eyed the small trickle of melt water running down the roof critically. "Shabon Spray Freezing!" The azure stream of freezing bubbles shot forward, applying a fresh layer to the monster's prison. "That will hold him for a while," she said. On the ground, a group of priests and citizens was observing at her every move. "Everyone, keep away from the monster, please! I will need some time for the next step!" She couldn't see anyone on the roof aside from herself, but felt that the warning was nevertheless necessary. Better safe than sorry. She stepped into the damaged structure where the large bell had been, out of sight, and turned into a speedy bolt of blackness that shot toward the ice golem patiently waiting submerged in a brook outside the city. Returning the possessed statue that looked just like her to the dungeon was a matter of minutes.

Ami appeared in a remote and deserted corners of her dungeon, and started to quickly construct a high security prison in, complete with the usual enchantments to prevent magic from being used inside. Watching the structure take shape as she funnelled gold and magic through the dungeon heart, she considered her handiwork with satisfaction. She had little doubt that the Reaper could break through the bars with enough time and effort, but she didn't intend to allow him that much freedom. Iron manacles, attached to chains that were as thick as her upper arms, hung from the wall, one for each limb, and a fifth held a collar for the neck. He wasn't getting away this time. She just hoped that she could convince him to part with the information about the dark gods that she needed. Maybe she should interrogate her own minions first. But before that, she had to get the monster actually here. By now, she had some practice with the long-range teleportation spell, but it was the first time that she was using it on an unwilling target. Nevertheless, that shouldn't pose a problem as long as it remained still for the few minutes that casting the spell would take. And the Reaper didn't exactly have much choice in the matter right now, she thought with a vicious grin. Taking a solid, wide legged-stance, she spread her arms and started to intone the chant of the spell, grey dress flapping around her legs when an ethereal wind started to blow from the magical circles appearing on the ground in front of her.

A guard of ice golems was flanking the block containing the Reaper, while a group of imps pushed it into the cell. Cautiously, they used their picks to first uncover a wrist. A manacle snapped shut around it, despite the struggles of the red-scaled hand to brush its captors away. The second hand was secured in the same way. Once the feet were freed, cracks started to spread through the ice, and from one moment to the other, the transparent shell shattered and clattered to the ground. The Reaper, hanging from his wrists, pulled up his legs and kicked out at an ice golem standing in front of him. The large hooves struck true, sending a spray of water and sharp-edged ice shards toward Ami, who barely managed to throw herself out of the way. Drenched to the skin and lying in a pool of ice water, Ami shouted "Tighten those chains! Right now!" which prompted her workers to turn the pulleys behind the wall. With creaks and rattles,

the demon's arms were spread wider and wider. Even the bulging muscles straining under his skin were unable to resist the force exerted by Ami's minions working in concert, their strength twice-multiplied by both the pulleys and the hydraulics in their limbs.

"Mercury! What do you think you are doing?" the monster growled through bared teeth, legs kicking wildly as they tried to find purchase on the ground. He was out of luck, because the tightening chains were lifting him bodily off the ground.

"Making sure that you are not going to get in my way again in the future," Ami answered as she stood up, shivering and wrapping her arms around herself for warmth as the wet and itchy cloth clung to her skin. "Shabon Spray Freezing!"

Putting the restraints on the beast was much easier when he was frozen, and the young senshi only waited for the last chains to go taut and the cell door to slam shut with an air of finality before teleporting to her own quarters with the Reaper's scythe in her arms. She was cold and needed to change.

Ami sneezed, dropped the weapon, and started to pull her cold, damp dress over her head. Then the smell hit her, and she nearly gagged. With a quick jerk, she finished taking the garment off, and frantically looked around to see what was stinking up the room. Had something crept in here and died? Her inspection did not reveal any corpses, but the wide-eyed Jered, who was sitting in one of the armchairs, staring at her scantily clad form. "Mercury! You are back! Finally! It's terrible-"

"Could you turn around, please!?" Ami shouted, hastily holding the recently-discarded dress in front of herself as if it was a towel. "What are you doing in my room?"

The brown-haired man turned away, coughing as he did so. Ami hastily conjured a black bathrobe and slipped into it. While she tied its belt, Jered continued talking. "Everyone's ill! Even the demons and the dragon! There's vomit all over the place, and everyone is getting sicker by the minute!"

Having recovered from the surprise, the senshi looked at him. His

face was pale, perspiration gleamed on his forehead, and ugly greenish-purple sores, as big as her thumbnail, dotted his skin. She noted the blood around his lips. She rushed to his side, already summoning her computer. What was that? A plague?! Could she risk touching him? On the other hand, if everyone had caught it, it must be air-transmissible, and she was already infected anyway. "How are you feeling? Are you in pain? When did this disease outbreak start?"

Jered coughed wetly. "About half an hour after you disappeared. You have to look after Cathy, she's in the next room! She collapsed a few minutes later, and her uniform dissolved. She's caught the disease even worse than any of us others, and I don't know how long she will last," he said, trying hard to hide the tears in his eyes.

Ami wasted no time and entered the next room, while the weasel-featured man shuffled after her. On the bed lay Cathy, her blonde hair spread out on the pillow like a wreath. The blanket covering her was rising and falling very slowly and shallowly, and her face showed the same pallor and sores as Jered's. Ami stepped closer and put her hand on the woman's forehead. It felt extremely hot, indicating a high fever. "From the timing, I think this might be the work of the dark gods," Ami guessed, "they weren't pleases with what I attempted to do, and even sent the Reaper after me. I'm sorry, I didn't want to put you in danger." Her consciousness flitted through the halls of her dungeon. Wherever the mental sight went, the scenes were the same. Moaning creatures sat around or lay on the floor, covered in boils and looking tired and unhealthy. "Darn it! Why did they have to get you involved? That was between me and them!"

"I don't think they are concerned with fairness," Cathy whispered, her eyelids opening as hazy blue eyes turned toward Ami.

"I- I'll do whatever I can to save you!" the Ami promised and summoned her visor. The display made the invisible links connecting all of her employees, as well as herself, to the dungeon heart stand out in stark relief. Immediately, the senshi could see that something was wrong. Black corruption crept across the lines, seeping out of the beating artefact itself. On closer inspection, the invisible miasma permeated every surface of the dungeon, lashing

out at any creature that came close, herself included. Yes, this definitely had to be a plague sent by the dark gods. Was she already developing a fever? But what could she do to stop it? Ami took a deep breath to calm herself. Slow down. Think about this logically. Like it or not, everyone in this dungeon is depending on you for survival, so get to work!

Ami did not know any spells to cure diseases. Her necromancy could knit flesh and bone back together, but that wouldn't fix the root of the problem. Still, if she undid the organ damage caused by the illness, that would buy her more time to look into a solution. Concentrating briefly, she did just that, and greenish energy danced over her fingers and into the resting blonde. The sores did not close entirely, but Cathy's cheeks took on a rosier colour, and her breathing strengthened. "That's only a temporary measure at best," Ami apologised, "and it didn't even work as well as I hoped. There are still poisons in your blood that I don't know how to remove, but at least we have gained some time." She approached the wavy-haired man and did the same for him. "Wait here, I need to invigorate the other underlings too."

Ami walked down the line of patients she had dropped gently into the long, straight corridor, stopping briefly at each one to use her necromantic healing spell. This was taking a long time, as there were still close to a hundred minions, even after her assault on the dungeon. Guiltily, she confessed to herself that she really hadn't given them enough thought or care. With horror, she realised that Malleus hadn't bothered to heal them up after her assault, and some were still blind or deaf until she got around to patching them up. She had really been neglecting her duties, even if she had other things on her mind at the time. Getting all the different types of underlings healed was proving to be a challenge, too. Humans, she knew how to handle. The warlocks and dominatrices in black leather had not been a problem. Even if the latter's outfit made her uncomfortable, she was professional enough to ignore them. The light gods mustn't have realised that there were also some pleasant memories to dim.

The trolls and orcs were pretty close to human, which should have made things easier. Instead, Ami was slightly confused about what their organ layout should be like, and it took her longer for the first

two or three of their race. Now the bile demons... Ami grimaced. The stench was bad enough, but those things were filthy! Didn't they ever wash? It took her real effort to reach out and touch a spot on their flabby rolls of fat so she could work her magic. The last patient was the young dragon, who filled half the corridor on its own. In contrast with the other creatures, it looked awake and not too weakened by the disease. Its tail was twitching like that of an angry cat, and the slitted pupils were fixating the approaching girl with a half-lidded stare.

"That won't help me," it rumbled, much to Ami's surprise. She hadn't believed that long, fanged snout to be able of forming human words, even if the beast was able to understand the language. "Already did it to myself. Better fix the cause of this, Keeper. I can put one and one together, and I'm sure the other creatures will figure it out sooner or later too. We don't intend to die for your mistake."

"Um, I'll do my best," Ami promised, backing away slightly. Those were some large teeth, seen from this close. It was sound advice, in any case.

Ami's stomach hurt, and her throat felt sore. She was already developing symptoms of the disease. At least Snyder was still healthy, protected within the temple of the Light gods, although apparently the citizens were now starting to ask him uncomfortable questions after she had disappeared without a trace, taking the Reaper along. Unfortunately, she didn't really have time to spare for him right now, and he was safer where he was anyway. She returned her attention to the vial full of blood on the desk before her. She didn't have a microscope, but it turned out that one could zoom in surprisingly far with a crystal ball. The spherical device to her right was showing a teeming mess of red blood cells, with larger, evil-looking bacteria crawling among them. The young senshi still didn't know a spell to cure disease, and neither did her necromancy books. It seemed that the dark art was only good for reanimating and enslaving the dead, knitting flesh and bone, and killing things. Coincidentally, modern medicine was also good at killing things. The trick was to only eliminate the intended target.

Ami had spent the last few hours fine tuning the spell. She couldn't just kill all micro-organisms in the body. Most of them were required to stay healthy, and their absence could be just as lethal as any illness. With a pipette, she carefully put a drop of blood on a glass cube containing a live spider, then extended a hand over the contraption. A black ray shot down from her palm, washing over the blood and the trapped insect. On the crystal ball, the disease bacteria shuddered and then broke up into little parts, while the other cells seemed unaffected. The confined spider continued scratching at the transparent walls of its prison in a panic, scared but unharmed.

This was it! Ami smiled a bright, relieved smile. This was the cure! Take, that, dark gods! Of course, she still needed to try it out. The ethical implication of using the untested and potentially lethal magic on her employees were worrisome, but they would die without it anyway, so that made it all right. Right? Sighing and with her heart beating quickly, Ami selected the weakest of her creatures, which happened to be a particularly small troll, and transported it to her laboratory. The creature was breathing laboriously, its normally green skin was pale yellow, and the open sores on its surface were beginning to blend together. The teenager stepped over the pitiful minion and let the black-coloured magic stream from her palms, moving it up and down like a shower. She then knelt next to the prone creature and applied the healing spell. The sores closed entirely. Victory! Ami felt like dancing a jig, but decided to double-check the results, just to be sure. With her visor and the crystal ball, she took a good look at the troll's blood. Her jaw dropped, and she hit the table's surface with her fist, making the equipment jump and clatter. "Darn it!" Within the scrying device, the evil bacteria had disappeared, only to be replaced by a multitude of others, too many types for Ami to count, much less develop a cure for.

Breathing heavily and coughing, she leaned on her desk, blue bangs hanging down from her inclined head. Tears of frustration glittered in the corners of her eyes. If the dark gods could undo her efforts this easily, what chance did she stand? Even if she brought in light priests from outside and somehow managed to convince them to help, each curing spell would just lead to re-infections. She couldn't even dismiss her creatures and send them away, as that wouldn't

get rid of the disease, only of the means of re-infection. She could maybe save Cathy, herself, and a few others by transporting them to a Light temple, but how should she choose who lived and died? And even if she did that, her dungeon heart would remain here, unprotected. Gulping, she balled her hands into fists. It looked as if she truly had no choice.

"Oh, it's you. Feeling a little unwell?" the Reaper mocked as he caught sight of Ami, who had appeared in front of his cell. The girl's face was showing the first large, painful sores, and she hid a cough behind her hand. "You should have let me kill you. Died with dignity. It's not too late yet," he leered at her neck, already considering the best cutting regions.

"Be quiet! Tell me how to stop this! How can I protect myself from the dark gods, or at least placate them?" Ami's eyes flashed red with anger at the humiliation of being reduced to this.

The demon let out a roaring laugh, leaning back his head. "You are asking *me* for help? Hah! What makes you think that I would even consider that?"

Ami smiled humourlessly at him. "Maybe the fact that if I die, you will be spending the rest of eternity in this cell, after I collapse the dungeon on it out of sheer spite? " The horned reaper's smile became a frown of irritation. "Or maybe," the girl continued cheerfully, "I should just send you back to your gods. They can't be too pleased at your failure. Malleus had a big temple I could toss you into," seeing the Reaper's sour face, she added "wearing the miniskirt you like so much."

The chained creature let out an angry snort. "Fine. Sacrifices. Show them that you have seen the error of your ways."

Ami had been expecting something like that, but it still felt like an ice-cold bucket of water being emptied out over her. "What kind of sacrifices? Valuables? Gold?"

"The temple is no wishing well, you dolt! I'm sure you can figure out

what they desire by yourself!"

"Lives." Ami replied in a very thin voice, Malleus' knowledge coming to her aid. It wasn't any help.

"If you already knew, why bother me?" the Reaper growled, rattling his chains.

It did come down to deciding who lived and died, then, Ami sighed. Unless... with a sudden flare of hope, she looked into the caged monster's yellow eyes. "Does it have to be whole lives?"

"Whole lives? What other kind is there? Have you gone even more crazy now? Right, disappear while I'm talking to you. Insufferable brat."

"Why should we still work for you? You brought the wrath of the dark gods down on us!" one of the sickly warlocks accused, pointing his staff at Ami.

She had no time for insubordination. "You know what's required to placate them, don't you? Are you volunteering?"

The short-bearded man seemed to fold in on himself "N-no, Keeper. What are your orders?"

"Sit around this crystal ball and watch, please." She was speaking loudly to be heard over the sneezes and coughs. Her palmtop opened, replaying recordings of people being drained of energy. The crystal ball served as a larger monitor so that everyone could see what was going on. Ami hit a few buttons, overlaying the scenes with all the information she had been able to gather on Dark Kingdom methodologies. "The objects you see in this crystal ball were enchanted to drain the life force out of their users and collect it. I want you to help me figure out a spell that can do this. Don't dawdle, your lives depend on it."

"You heard the Keeper," the Alchemist stood up, then sneezed into his sleeve. "Such an interesting project too. To work!"

Hating herself, Ami hovered over the centre of her dungeon heart, bathing in the mana flow. She coughed once, feeling the metallic taste of blood in her throat. Closing her eyes, she concentrated. The lights in the room seemed to go out as she grasped for the strands of magic that connected the slowly beating device to all of her minions. She could feel her underlings collapse, one after the other, while a glowing ball of energy grew between her palms. This was so distasteful, she thought while a tear trickling down her sore-covered cheek. Weakening those who were already sick. Was she any better than a youma? How was she ever going to explain this to her friends when she got back? No, she was doing this for the right reasons! She *had* to try to save everyone, and wouldn't forfeit anyone she was responsible for! What kind of doctor would she be if she did?

Ami disappeared, flashing back into existence inside the large, ornate hall that had been Malleus' temple. Had she still been suffering from the full brunt of the late Keeper's memories, she would probably have fled screaming, or fainted from the mass of horrifying memories. Instead, she looked at the thin, pearly pillars framing a large basin in the centre of the room, trying desperately not to think about the victims who had perished painfully in this place. Flickering purple lights burned inside of bowls that looked like the open maws of large-bellied demons. Their light paled in comparison to the swirling ball of energy she was carrying. As she approached the arches surrounding the water, the ever-present whispers in the room surged in intensity, hovering just beyond the edge of understanding. Ami felt a shiver go through her that had nothing to do with the temperature. In front of her, the pool frothed and bubbled, looking at the same time clear as the purest mountain spring and inky black like a bottomless abyss. The patterns dancing across its surface were hypnotic, and the blue-haired girl had to forcefully tear her gaze away. She knew that nothing that dipped below the surface of this particular basin ever returned.

Ami took another step forward before falling to her knees, steeling herself for what came next. In a perverse way, the knowledge that she was already damned felt oddly liberating. But enough procrastination. "Hear me, Dark Gods! You have shown that I am powerless before you, and that my actions were thoughtless and ill-

advised. Please accept this gift as an apology for my misconduct and grant me forgiveness!" If eating crow was what it took to save those who depended on her, then that she would do. The globe of gathered life-force drifted forward, hovering for a moment above the dark waters, and then shot down to become one with its reflection.

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Ultimatum

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In the black depths of the temple's rectangular basin, lights flashed and wandered, as if a thunderstorm was unleashing its fury deep beneath the surface. Ami bent away from the waters that her knees were nearly touching when a strong wind howled outward from the pool. It blew her blue bangs out of her face and felt icy cold on the wet spots where her sores had suddenly opened. She half-closed her eyes to protect them from flying dirt particles and scuttled backward. Was this a good sign or a bad sign? The storm continued raging without disturbing the waters, its howls mixing with and modulating the perpetual whispers that echoed between the many pearl-coloured arches surrounding the central basin until they sounded like roars. Ami still couldn't understand a word that was being said, but got the distinct impression that there were different voices, and that they were arguing agitatedly. The tempest beneath the waters seemed to inch closer to the surface, and Ami pulled herself to her feet so she could step away further.

One after the other, some of the clamouring voices dropped out until a single one remained. When that fell silent too, Ami felt a tremor under her soles. An enormous pressure seemed to hang in the air. Suddenly, the girl's head whipped to the left, from where she had heard a loud bang. One of the braziers shaped like the gaping mouth of some monster had exploded into shards. Even as she watched, the one next to it exploded into a spray of splinters. She ducked her head and shielded her face with her arms, already hearing similar cracks from the other side of the room. This chain of events was not reassuring. Deep, roaring laughter reverberated through the chamber, shaking the walls and making her bones and teeth vibrate. No, not reassuring at all. Ami stood frozen to the spot, not out of her own volition. She tried to move or transport herself, but her muscles weren't obeying her at all. Only her eyes could still dart around wildly in their sockets, taking in the devastation raging through the room. Like trees in a hurricane, the pillars surrounding the central basin bent and broke, smashing into the grisly

decorations along the walls. With a groan of tortured metal, the huge silver idol depicting a horned, pot-bellied monstrosity that sat prominently in a central alcove at the other side of the room split in twain. The laughter reached a crescendo, and the quakes and winds started to die down, their fury expended. With all the braziers destroyed, the room was pitch black, except for the central basin, which seemed lit by something prowling just underneath the bubbling surface. Ami could feel the attention of the malevolent entity turn toward her. It felt like being scrutinised by a very large, hungry lion.

"So you are the Keeper who exterminated the last followers of my ancient enemy, the Devourer," a voice grumbled in the senshi's mind. *"For that favour, consider your punishment suspended,"* the mental voice hissed.

"Thank you. That is very generous," Ami grovelled, waiting for the other shoe to drop. The use of 'suspended' didn't bode well.

"Silence! I am Azzathra the Mighty Tyrant, and while you have served me unwittingly in the past, your weakness offends me!" the dark god continued, *"Eliminate it, for I shall test you. Succeed, and all is forgiven. Fail to rise to the task, and the plague will run its course."*

Uh oh. "Test me? How?" the slight girl asked with a quavering voice, hoping that the being wouldn't demand that she commit massacres or other atrocities on its behalf.

"Defeat that other disappointment currently residing in your cell. You have until the next equinox."

"The horned reaper? But I have already beaten him," Ami protested, blinking.

"With trickery and spells," Azzathra dismissed, "Hardly a test of strength and martial prowess. No, I demand a victory in melee combat!" Chuckling at the blue-haired girl's expression, the oppressive presence continued *"Oh, and before I leave, an entity that enjoyed your pathetic offering rather more than I did wants you to have this."*

Ami could feel the hateful *thing* retreat, and she dropped to her knees. Not out of piety or respect, but because her legs were giving out under her. Defeat the reaper in close combat? Just how was she supposed to do that? This was as good as a death sentence. The monster was stronger, faster, and larger than her, and could take insane amounts of damage. Any time she had struck at him directly in the past, he had only been inconvenienced, rather than hurt.

Movement in the water in front of her shook her from her gloomy thoughts. A whirlpool was spinning the liquid inside the bottomless basin around, and something large was rising up through the funnel. Despite never touching the waves, the fire-trailing, scorched-looking crystal turned around its own axis at the same rate that the whirlpool did. Ami stepped aside when the sooty thing bobbed upward like a cork on a wave and bounced toward the shore, where it landed among the fallen pillars of the temple. A gift from a dark god? Cautious but curious, the teenager approached the oblong thing. Where it wasn't covered in ash, it had the same colour as ice. Was there something inside? Ami picked up a pennant lying in the rubble and used it to clean the black soot from the surface of the object. When she leaned over the clear spot, her eyes went wide with shocked recognition. From within the block, unseeing steel-blue eyes stared back from a face covered in cat scratches.

"J-Jadeite!"

Ami was riding an emotional roller coaster after the Dark Kingdom general had appeared in her dungeon. First came surprise at his presence and seeing him like this, then elation. If he was here, he couldn't threaten her friends back home! But what if he broke free? She had never seen him fight, but by Sailor Moon's own admission, she had been completely powerless against him. Wait, was he even alive in there? A quick scan with her visor revealed that he was not only alive, but also awake, and had been in the crystal for some time now, deprived of all sensory input. Anxiety turned to pity. That had to be terrible. As evil went, he hadn't been so bad, certainly not when compared to the Keepers, or even their minions. His plans had neither killed anyone nor inflicted undue pain. Ami smiled faintly. How quick one's standards could change. She moved the crystal

into her prison, though into a separate cell from the Reaper's. Hope flared up in the blue-haired senshi's heart suddenly. Maybe Jadeite could get her home! If he could open a portal back to the Dark Kingdom, then he could certainly take her along, and she already knew that he was able to reach Tokyo from there! Then again, why should he? How could she get him to cooperate, and why was he even here in the first place? The terrifying thought that she might have endangered her home by furthering the goals of the Dark Kingdom went through Ami's mind, smashing her pleasant daydream of being reunited with her friends.

A cough that tasted like blood reminded her that she had more pressing issues than an immobilised dark general. The dark gods may have removed the disease, but they had done nothing to speed recovery or remove the damage already done. Which left Ami with a dungeon full of weak and comatose creatures who needed to be cared for. Necromancy only went so far in patching up wounds and battered organs. It did nothing about fatigue, lack of energy, or weakness. Ami put both hands on her stomach and concentrated on patching up what she could. It would be easier to recover without wounds and internal bleeding. She transported herself to the long corridor that served as sick bay, and let her eyes wander over her minions, lined up on the foul-smelling straw. At first glance, they looked dead, but to Ami's relief, she could still feel their connections to her dungeon heart, which proved that there was still life in them. The links also helped her to judge just how weak each one of them was, and she gave aid to the most needy first, teleporting from one patient to the next. It was disheartening how they remained prone and motionless despite her ministrations. What they were suffering from was exhaustion, lack of energy, and blood loss. Nothing that her magic could help with.

The minions needed rest, water, food, and hygiene. Feeling weak from the recent illness, Ami was glad that she could leave those tasks to her 'nurses'. As if summoned by the thought, a row of ice golems appeared within the tunnel, all turning their head toward her in eerie unison. Being stared at by twenty icy doubles of oneself was strangely disconcerting, Ami found. Especially when the icy armour covering some of the oldest ones had already melted away. Having no longer even the energy to blush, the girl ordered them all to

approach her. Several rapid applications of the fabrication spell later, all of the statue girls were wearing identical white nurse uniforms. Sitting down, Ami instructed them about the dos and don'ts of their new job. If only there was some way to speed up- of course! Snyder was an acolyte, he should have better healing spells! What was he up to right now, anyway? Oh. Oh dear.

"Ahem, I assure you that I am not an apostate, despite what circumstances have conspired to make it appear," Snyder defended himself, looking up at the judge, whose oversized nose was peering over the edge of the bench like the beak of a vulture, presumably to check if the truth-finding diagram on the ground was indeed glowing green.

"But you admit to associating with and being in the employ of a Keeper?" he asked, attempting to dig deeper.

Snyder sighed. "Yes." He wilted under the glare of the attendant crowd, and quickly added "But I assure that Keeper Mercury is different than other Keepers! She is actually a sweet and gentle person if you get to know her!"

"Silence in the courtroom!" the judge banged his hammer on the wood, trying to calm the storm of disparaging remarks that the redhead's confession had triggered. "Do behave yourselves, or I will have you thrown from this room! You can see that the diagram is glowing green, so the accused certainly *thinks* he is telling the truth."

"The poor, deluded fool," someone in the crowd shouted.

"I am not deluded," the short acolyte protested. "She has never asked me to do anything evil or criminal, aside from getting into this city by night, and I don't believe that she intends to do so in the future!"

Peering down over Snyder's bowl cut at the still green lines under his boots, the judge frowned. "Very well. What *have* you been doing for that Keeper?"

The priest-in-training stopped to consider this. "Well, I have healed her a few times, but she prefers to do so herself. Most of the time, I have been working on a warding scheme."

One of the attending priests raised his hand, signalling that he wanted to ask the accused a question. "A warding scheme for what, exactly?"

Snyder turned to face him. "Several things, actually. A way to prevent the dark energy from her dungeon heart to have detrimental effects on the environment. Some research into magical batteries. And a ward to fix a rather specific problem with her dungeon heart. I think that is more or less it."

The priest seemed surprised. "She gave you access to her dungeon heart?" Frowning, as if deep in thought, he added "Did that ward work as intended?"

"Only partly," Snyder admitted, "but I'm sure I can get rid of the side effects if I only spend more time on it."

"Did those 'side effects' ever hurt anyone?" the bearded holy man asked, twirling the point of his beard as he waited for the answer.

"Unfortunately so," the acolyte had to admit after a short pause. "But that was an accident, and nobody could have predicted that!"

"Was the person who was hurt an enemy of the Keeper, by chance?"

"Yes." Snyder didn't like the direction in which the conversation was being led, "but-"

"So, to summarise," the older man interrupted him, raising a finger for each point, "the Keeper has tricked the accused into working on - one: a system that would make her dungeons harder to detect, - two: enhanced mana storage, and three: a new kind of last ditch defence for her dungeon hearts. Her approach is worrisome in that she is attempting to co-opt the powers of Good for her evil plans. The skill with which this poor acolyte has been brainwashed is another indication of the kind of threat this Mercury poses. Honoured

judge, I humbly request that he be confined to house arrest within the temple, where the Keeper cannot get to him and where the nefarious conditioning can be undone."

The judge pondered this, then nodded slowly so he wouldn't dislodge his white wig with the movement. "That sounds like the best option. He is not evil, merely gulli-"

"Oh nonsense!" Snyder exploded.

"I will have silence from the accuse-"

"Fine! I admit that she could have brainwashed me! But are you really so arrogant to assume that she could have brainwashed the Light, too? She was in their temple, praying to them, after all, and nothing bad happened to her!" Snyder's face was red with anger as he glared at his opponent.

The old priest's mouth opened and closed several times as he searched for an answer to *that*. Then, his eyes lit up in realisation. "Of course! That girl with you was never the Keeper, but just someone who would do that villain's bidding! Someone who looked the part but was wretched enough that the gods would take pity on her. Rumours have it that during her trial, it came out that she was some kind of who-"

The doors to Evercalm's courtroom flew open with a bang. "Hold it right there!"

All heads turned in the direction of the intruder, whose slender silhouette was standing in the doorframe, with fog streaming in past her long legs and her eyes glowing like red pinpricks. Someone in the back row started screaming. Ami was not in her senshi uniform. For one thing, she didn't want to risk transforming when the transformation could spread to all of her sick minions, for the other, the outfit *was* rather risqué for the local culture, and she didn't want to make an even worse impression than she was about to. So she had created an approximation of the uniform by herself. She had kept the leotard and the familiar colour scheme, but had gotten rid of the ribbons and sailor collar in favour of some light armouring. The skirt had been replaced by more modest blue trousers. Seeing how

everyone was paying attention to her, she was rather glad about that choice. Foregoing a speech - that was Sailor Moon's shtick - she strode into the room, giving way for her team of four ice golems to take position on her flanks. Ami had been following the proceedings through Snyder's senses, and the misrepresentation of her character hurt. She hadn't know how much she had longed for approval, for one normal village in which she wouldn't be considered pure evil, until those hopes were dashed by the priest's suspicious words. "I will not let you lock away an innocent man just because you cannot believe the truth!" She stated.

"Guards!" the judge was ducking out of sight behind the bench, and Ami could see the men and women in purple and white armour march toward her reluctantly, cowering behind the points of their halberds. Ami's golems shifted to face them. The guardsmen had been friendly enough when Ami had been their prisoner, and she didn't particularly wish to fight them. "Hello? I defeated a Reaper on my own, remember?" the blue-haired girl smiled in their direction. They paled and hesitated.

"Naturally, that was staged too! It all makes sense in hindsight!" the priest shouted, standing up to his full height and looking imposing in his white-and-gold robes.

Instead of answering, Ami walked past the guards and toward Snyder, who seemed speechless at her sudden intrusion. She took position on the magical diagram next to him, looked the priest straight in the eyes, and said "The Reaper really was trying to kill me, everything Snyder said was completely true, and," she blushed slightly, "I'm really the Keeper, *nothing else!*" The magical diagram under her boots flared bright green, confirming everything she had said. The priest faltered under her glare, and from the crowd came shrieks of terror and muffled sobs. Ami turned to look at the pale, terrified faces all cringing away from her, and felt her righteous indignation shrivel up and die. Scaring them had not been her intention, and it hurt that they considered her a monster. She forcefully turned her expression into a soft smile. "Please, there is no need to panic. I promise that I will harm nobody who doesn't try to prevent us from leaving." The cold fog billowing around her legs shone green under the light of the diagram. "Snyder, let's go." She

tugged at his sleeve. "Um, that is if you want to," she added softly, scratching her head with her left hand. Maybe she should have asked him first if he didn't want to stay with his own people, now that his life was in no danger.

The redhead blushed lightly and nodded after only the shortest moment of hesitation. "Thanks for coming to save me."

Snyder wasn't particularly skilled at healing magic, which translated in him looking dead tired even after only strengthening Cathy and Snyder. The two adventurers, who had occupied the beds in Ami's private chambers, were sitting next to each other within the late Malleus' living room. "Sorry," the acolyte excused himself, "I am really best with magical items, not with direct spells."

"We still appreciate your help," Ami assured him with a bright smile.

Even Cathy gave a grudging nod in the redhead's direction. "Yes, it's nice to be able to walk on my own again. For a while, I thought that plague was going to be the end of us. Though I'm feeling kind of weak and unprotected now, without Mercury's enchantments."

"Oh, right, they dispersed at some point while Mercury was away," Jered confirmed, already dressed in his usual combination of green shirt, brown pants, and bandoleer of daggers around his chest.

"Now that you mention it, she looks a bit different now," Snyder agreed.

"Can you replace the enchantments?" the blonde asked, making puppy-dog eyes at Ami, who shook her head.

"Not right now, sorry. This dungeon heart isn't warded yet against the transformation side effect spreading to everyone else, and I would prefer to not annoy my employees further after all this," the blue-haired girl explained.

"I can understand that," Cathy replied, then took a long sip of water from a bowl that one of the ice golems had brought her. "Actually, how *did* you get rid of that disease?"

"Well..." this was one of the questions that Ami had dreaded. She put her hands together in her lap and fidgeted with her fingers, while looking at her toes. "I- I tried everything I could think of," she said reluctantly. "I even managed to create a cure of my own, but the dark gods just improved their plague and made all my work worthless."

Snyder and Cathy listened intently to her words. Jered raised an eyebrow, apparently aware of where this was going.

"I saw no other solution, so - I prayed to the dark gods. I couldn't just let everyone die!" Ami blurted out, looking up and expecting to find disgust on the faces of her companions. Snyder seemed the most surprised, his brown eyes were wide, and he looked as if she had just slapped him. Jered took the news in stride, and Cathy's lips narrowed to a thin line, as if she had bitten into something bitter.

"And they took away the plague, just like that? What did they ask of you?" the blonde's voice sounded sharper than she might have intended to.

Ami cringed. "They, well, I bribed them." Before her listeners could jump to conclusions, she quickly added "I didn't kill anyone! I just adapted a spell my enemies in my world used to drain energy from people, used it, and offered the lifeforce to the dark gods! Everyone will recover completely from that with enough rest!"

"Really? That doesn't sound quite evil enough to mollify them," the blonde said dubiously. She looked greatly displeased with the news.

"It didn't, unfortunately. The punishment is suspended, not lifted. I have to defeat the Reaper in close combat before the next equinox for it to be lifted," Ami said with a shiver, pulling her knees up to her chest and encircling them with her arms.

"What? Are they insane?" Cathy shrieked. "With the way you fight, that's not a chance, that's certain death!"

"Next equinox? That's still three or four months," Jered commented. "Enough time to come up with a good way to cheat."

Snyder was concentrating on a different issue "You, you prayed to the dark gods," he stammered, "I understand that you thought you had no other choice, but what about the gods of the Light? Why didn't you ask them for help at the temple?"

"I did. They basically told me that there's nothing they can do for me since my soul is in the realm of the dark gods, and I'd have to get it back first. For which I'd have to start worshipping one of the dark gods first to know where exactly it is."

"I hope you didn't do that," the redhead answered, wide eyed.

Ami shook her head. "No, I used a general prayer to all of the dark gods. Though one of them apparently liked my offering more than the others, and sent me a 'gift'."

The others leaned forward. "A gift? You don't look too unhappy about that, what could it be? One of those sparks of life to make a new dungeon heart?" Jered guessed.

"No, someone from my own world," the blue-haired girl answered looking up. "An enemy actually, trapped in crystal, still alive. I don't know why he is here, but I intend to find out. Maybe I can even get him to take me home. He is dangerous, though, so there are some precautions to take..."

Last edited: Nov 17, 2017

Recruitment Preparations

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The rolling, ash-coloured dunes stretched out like an ocean before Ami, their tips protruding from the ever-present swirls of floating dust like the backs of diving whales. The girl was standing on top of one of the hills of sand, close to the well-like bricked shaft whose spiral staircase led down to her domain. She had not used it, of course - her movements were still lethargic from fighting off the disease. Unlike the late Malleus, she had chosen to let her imps claim the surface above her dungeon instead of relying on the instability of the sand to stop intruders, and thus had simply appeared out of thin air on the crest she had chosen. With a short, shouted incantation, she uncrossed her arms, sending an azure spray of bubbles into the landscape. Hardly aiming, she repeated the spell again and again.

"Uhm, Mercury? What exactly are you doing?" Jered's head poked out from the round stone-encircled hole in the ground. He had been silently observing the girl fire spells into the haze for a while now, watching her slender body move under the tight-fitting white and blue clothes. It was a good thing that Cathy was busy elsewhere, or she would have elbowed him in the ribs already. It felt like being jabbed with an iron rod while she was under Mercury's enchantments, too, he winced at the remembered pain. It hadn't been his intention to spy on the girl; it just wasn't in his nature to draw attention to himself, and he had no intention to get into the blazing sun. Why the Keeper was exercising in the heat under the poison-green sky was an enigma to him, and seeing spell after spell disappear into the sneeze-inducing dust clouds lost its shine after the first few times.

Ami wiped the sweat from her brow with the back of her hand and turned toward the brown-haired man, seeming unsurprised at his presence. "Oh, I'm experimenting with my powers, and what I'm trying to do has at least the potential to go violently wrong, so I'm doing it outside."

"Should I be worried?" the muscles in Jered's neck tensed as he ducked a bit deeper into the hole.

With a smile, Ami shook her head. "No, there's no reason to, at least not right now. The results are quite encouraging," the girl exclaimed, proud in her work. "It occurred to me that if I can move my own creatures around, why not magical attacks too? They aren't too big, made of pure magic, and certainly belong to me. And it works, but the tricky part is catching them."

The weasel-featured man briefly considered the possibilities."Hmm, so you can redirect missed attacks. That *is* useful."

"That, too," Ami answered, sounding excited, "but that's not the real benefit." Ami pointed to a large neighbouring dune. "Observe."

Obediently, Jered looked past the Keeper at the large hill of ash-like sand. Only a slight widening of Ami's red-glowing eyes gave away what was about to come. No activation phrase, motion, or other warning preceded the multiple near-simultaneous blue flashes along the dune's length. The entire side of the hill disappeared under a thick crust of ice, from which streams of condensing water vapour flowed downwards, carried along by the sinking cool air.

"Whoa. I am impressed," Jered whistled, "that could take out a small force by itself. Way to go!"

Blushing slightly at the praise, Ami hurried to add some qualifiers to her achievement. "Thank you, but this is a demonstration in optimal conditions," she pointed out. "The main limitation is that the attacks keep going in the same direction that they were initially fired. I can put them into 'storage', but I need to remember which way they were going, if I want to use them effectively. Also, I expect that I will not be able to manifest them inside enemy territory, same as the imps."

"Oh. I assume it would be rather difficult to keep track of that while spinning and turning around in a heated battle. Still, it is a dangerous technique," Jered re-evaluated his initial estimation of the rapid fire attack. "Plus, you can strike from a distance, without putting yourself into danger. That's worth a lot."

"Remembering which attack goes which way isn't so difficult. Look," the blue-haired girl said, concentrating hard on using the so far not particularly useful trick of bringing transported objects back into the real world without releasing them. Suddenly, the grey dunes took on a bluish hue as a bright azure light washed over them. Hearing a faint crackling noise, Jered shifted his gaze upwards, and stared at the breath-taking formation hanging in the air. Scintillating, rotating clumps of bubbles glowed like stars, forming eight straight lines that radiated outward from Ami's location like the spokes of a horizontal wheel.

"Each of those sparkly lights is a prepared attack, and they are going in the same direction as the line they are part of, and away from you?" the man guessed.

"That is correct," Ami confirmed. "Their position remains static in relation to the world, not me, though, so I need a bit of time to pick the right ones and aim them. Just about as much as if they were marbles that I wanted to throw, but it's a noticeable delay." With a flick of her wrist, the held spells disappeared back into the strange storage space provided by the dungeon heart.

Jered sat down on the wall surrounding the rim of the dungeon entrance, braving the heat of the direct sunlight. "Is there any particular reason why you are doing these experiments now? I thought you would be busy with more time-critical things."

Ami disappeared from her position and plopped down next to him, her boots sinking into the fine-grained sand. "Yes. This is something I cannot delegate. I trust Cathy to come up with a suitable battle plan against the west coast Keeper, and Snyder is very busy healing selected underlings and warding my new dungeon heart. I will have to rely on my golems again, and I want to be able to freely upgrade them to senshi form if necessary. Therefore, I can't proceed until he is done."

"Ah, yes. Speaking of Snyder and the results of his often flawed work, what happened to Boris? I didn't see him in the sick bay?"

"Oh, he's fine, he didn't even get sick. From what I could tell, the chaos magic in his blood just integrated the disease into him, the

same way it combined his body and that tentacle monster." Ami looked a bit green around the nose. "I fear other organisms he comes in contact with might fare the same, despite all efforts to find a cure for him."

Jered shuddered a bit at the mental pictures this conjured. "Right. I suggest you take him to a Light temple, explain the situation, and let them deal with it. They are more qualified, and he'd be out of your hair."

That was a solution that Ami had already considered, but it felt a bit like shirking her responsibility, which left a bad taste in her mouth. Nevertheless, it *was* the best possibility for a cure for the unfortunate berserker. "Maybe you are right. But could you go back underground, please?" Ami asked. "I'm going to try figuring out what triggered the corrupted versions of my spells, and that could be dangerous to you."

The willowy man shrugged his shoulders, looking disappointed. "Sure. If only it wasn't so boring down there with everyone either occupied or resting from the disease."

Ami gave him an apologetic look. "Sorry, but I don't really have a job for you until the portal is rebuilt, and I can't get started with that until at least the warlocks have recovered."

"Yes, I know," Jered sighed. "I guess I will be back to searching for info on Azzathra in the library, or supervising the 'nurses', then. They can get frighteningly enthusiastic at times. Could you move me over to the sick bay, please?"

"Certainly," the blue haired Keeper nodded, and suddenly the wavy-haired man disappeared as if he had been nothing but a mirage. Alone again, Ami teleported on to top of the highest dune, getting ready to test her theory. The only occasion on which the blackened versions of her magic had manifested had been a high-stress situation in which her magical abilities were taxed to the limit. At first, Ami had thought that they were the result of some corruption seeping in from the dungeon heart while her senshi powers were too strained to keep it out, but recent experiences with being cut off from her Keeper powers for a while had lead her down a different track.

In that weakened state, using her Shabon Spray Freezing spell had been intensely draining, while the regular Shabon spray had not been. The same was true when Cathy, who did not have the benefit of a dungeon heart, used the same spells. This indicated that the Freezing version used more power than Sailor Mercury could easily access, regardless of whom was currently using the transformation. Combined with the observation from Malleus' memories that Ami's dungeon heart was regenerating mana at an astonishing rate, this led her to a hypothesis: Shabon Spray Freezing used more energy than being a senshi continuously provided, but less than the dungeon heart could hold. It was easiest to think about it like a lake fed by a river and a brook. The lake was the dungeon heart, basically a large reservoir that gathered the inflowing magic for later use. The river was her sailor senshi transformation and provided a steady stream of mana at a constant rate, without being able to adjust for times of higher power consumption. Finally, the brook was the trickle of dark power that would usually fill the dungeon heart, nearly insignificant when compared to the river. When Ami used Shabon Spray Freezing, she exceeded the capacity of the 'river', but the difference was made up by the power stored in the 'lake', which refilled when she wasn't using the spell.

Now, when she had assaulted Malleus' dungeon, she had empowered several golems with her senshi transformation, which must have committed all the incoming senshi power, basically drying up the river. Thus, the lake had refilled very slowly from the brook source only. Which meant that instead of her Mercury magic, she had been fuelling these spells with evil energy pooling in the dungeon heart. They certainly had *felt* evil. Ami stretched, preparing for the task at hand. She would have to dump all the magic currently in her dungeon heart, but at the moment, she couldn't just transform a few golems to get rid of the inrushing Mercury power. She'd have to discharge it the hard way, by casting Shabon Sprays repeatedly and as fast as she could, until the dungeon heart had sufficiently filled with dark magic.

Ami looked wide-eyed at her handiwork. She had to peer through a dense cloud of chilly fog, the by-product of her efforts, to see the

results of her dark magic powered version of the Shabon Spray Freezing. Half-buried in the sandy flank of the targeted dune was an arrow-shaped wedge of obsidian-black ice, bristling with sharp ridges and spikes. The jagged projectile seemed more suited to impaling and shredding a target than to actually freezing it, Ami found, panting from the exertion of keeping up a barrage of spells continuously for several minutes. The sand under the gleaming black ice slipped away, and with a shudder, the dark bolt came loose and rolled down the slope. Hard but brittle spines snapped with clinking noises, littering the sand with cutting shards. When the remains of the attack came to a rest in a cloud of powdery sound, Ami teleported herself close to it. From the field of shards, her own visor-covered face stared back at her from a thousand reflections on the black ice. It was disappearing quickly, evaporating, rather than melting into water. Her analysis confirmed that the cold substance was unsuited for trapping something within, as it tended to break into lethal splinters at the lightest provocation. This, Ami pondered, was a spell intended mainly for killing.

Still, maybe she should store a few away for later use. She wanted to have as many advantages and fail-safes at her beck and call when she confronted Jadeite, in case he was feeling uncooperative. Since she couldn't attack that other Keeper right now, freeing him had moved up on the list of things to address as soon as possible. While it was dangerous, leaving him to suffer in total sensory deprivation any longer than strictly necessary would have been callous. Besides, she was curious how he had ended up in the crystal in the first place and yearning for news about her friends. With any luck, he would even be able to get her home! The faster she was reunited with her friends the better, and she had already missed nearly two precious weeks of school, too! However, that still wouldn't get her soul back, or let her survive the fight against the Reaper. Ami deflated. Her future looked bleak, but she would just have to tackle one problem after the other. Starting with the dark general currently trapped in a transparent shell.

The cell that contained the crystal-encased prisoner resembled a cage at the zoo. It's vertical bars spanned the distance between

floor and ceiling of an otherwise empty room, forming a square in the centre of the chamber. Ami walked around it once, scanning the immobile object inside. When she was satisfied that nothing had changed, she nodded to her troop of transparent golems. The twenty simulacrums distributed themselves evenly around the cage, five warriors in ice chainmail facing the bars on each side. If Jadeite made trouble, he would be surrounded and at a great disadvantage. At least she hoped so. The slender girl stopped at the front of the cell, and three bars retracted into the ceiling to let her enter. The foreign memories she had stolen from Malleus informed her that dungeon prisons were about as shielded against unauthorised magical transport as they could get, so at least she wouldn't have to worry about him teleporting out. She took a step forward, putting a hand on one of the smooth facets entrapping the man. It felt cold to the touch, like glass. Within the crystal, the dark general was cringing away in frozen movement. The pupils of his steel-blue eyes were fear-filled pinpricks beneath his blonde curls, and his mouth was half-open in protest. Whatever had happened to him obviously hadn't been his own choice. Ami briefly entertained the notion that the dark god who had enjoyed her sacrifice had rewarded her by eliminating an enemy. She shook her head. That went beyond what she assumed them to be capable of.

Ami wished that more of her army was healthy and recovered, but she had to work with what she had. She patted the large minion to her left once, her mouth turning into a wry smile. Aside from him, her army of golems and Jered would have to do, neither of which looked very intimidating. Oh well. Lips becoming a line of determination, Ami concentrated. The hand resting on the block darkened until its skin was a light-devouring black, and with a soft push, the limb sank into the crystal. Within the reflections on its transparent surface, she could see Jered raise an eyebrow and take half a step back. She was giving *herself* the creeps, so she could understand his reaction. It was silly, of course. This was just a slight modification of the possession spell, which, if one stopped to think about it, was much scarier than what she was currently attempting to do. Jadeite wasn't her underling, so she couldn't possess him, but she hoped that she could at least talk to him like this. The shadow-like hand sank deeper into the glassy material, until it touched the man's forehead, and kept going.

"Jadeite!"

"... six-hundred forty nine thousand and three, six-hundred forty nine thousand and four, six - Huh?"

"Jadeite, can you hear me?"

"I'm not dreaming?" Jadeite's voice turned from bored out of his mind to complete attention in an instant. *"Who is this? Has Queen Beryl decided to give me another chance?"*

Ami could feel the desperate hope that accompanied the question, laced with a hint of resentful anger. *"I'm afraid I don't know this Queen Beryl you are talking about."* she answered. Dark Kingdom. Queen Beryl. Had he offended his ruler somehow?

"You don't...? Never mind. Get me out of here, please!" He sounded slightly confused, but eager. When Ami failed to respond because she was thinking, he continued *"Hello? Are you still there? Please don't go away! Don't leave me here!"*

"I'm still here," the blue-haired girl tried to calm him. The dark general seemed terrified of the possibility that she could just go away. His need and fear gave her some leverage. Maybe enough? *"I think I could get you out of there,"* she offered. *"However, my powers only allow me to teleport people who serve me, so..."*

"You want my allegiance?" Jadeite asked, instantly suspicious. *"You haven't even told me who you are!"*

"Well, your other options are me taking a pick to the crystal you are trapped in and hoping that you are in a somewhat recognisable shape when I'm done, or just staying trapped in there like a fly in amber," Ami explained in her best impression of an 'I'm an evil Keeper who doesn't care one way or another' voice. It wasn't very convincing, in her opinion.

"Point taken," the dark general conceded. Did it really matter what he promised that strange woman? If she was weak, he could adjust this situation easily to be more to his liking. In the unlikely case that she was stronger than him, the choice was out of his hands either

way. Anything had to be better than rotting here in this prison, motionless, unable to see, hear, or touch, with nothing but his own mind for company. Curse Beryl for throwing him away like that! *"All right. I agree to serve you, if you rescue me from this imprisonment!"* He had barely uttered the words when he felt the strange sensation of foreign magic flowing into him, locking in place in some way he couldn't quite define. He wondered if he hadn't just made a huge mistake.

As soon as Ami had the man's resigned agreement, she poured as much power as she could into forging the link between her dungeon heart and the dark general. From Malleus, she knew that those bonds couldn't be trivially broken. It required a huge exertion of will, and the unfaithful creature had to be rightly furious at the Keeper to even attempt the act. If she didn't go out of her way to antagonise Jadeite, then they should hold. With the Reaper, it was different. The demon got angry at pretty much everything, and his whole personality was diametrically opposed to her own. It was pretty much inevitable that he would get annoyed enough with her to free himself eventually. Jadeite would hopefully be more compatible. She pulled her shade-like hand out of the crystal without causing a noise, and backed away to provide some room. It was time to hold up her end of the bargain. From one moment to the other, the crystal changed to contain nothing but a man-shaped hollow, and Jadeite appeared in front of it, still in the same pose, but only for a moment. The shock of suddenly being able to see and having to support his own weight again made him stumble. Muscles cramped from staying in the same position for too long refused cooperation, and the inevitable happened. The blond man toppled forward and landed flat on his belly.

Ami's hand went up to her mouth as she watched the dark general's face meet the ground. That was not how she had expected this meeting to play out. Had she been of a more brash disposition, like Rei for example, she might have commented on how kissing her boots was unnecessary. Jadeite, for his part, would have been annoyed at making such an undignified first impression, if he hadn't been busy suppressing a wince at the prickling sensations running through his stiff limbs as blood rushed into them. He lifted his chin from the floor - rough stone, he noted, not in the dark tones of

Beryl's throne room - and turned his gaze upward. The first he saw of the person who had freed him, at least that was who he assumed she was, were small boots, covered in traces of ash-like dust. His gaze wandered higher, taking in the blue trousers. The best that could be said about those was that they were functional, the dark general noted with some disdain. A white leotard covered the slender figure's torso, bulging at the chest. A short, open jacket that looked as if contained some armour hung from the girls' shoulders. Finally, his gaze reached her head. The lower part of her face was hidden behind a hand raised in surprise, and she had short blue hair. The large, red-glowing eyes however revealed that this wasn't just some random waif, but a being of some power.

Later, he would blame the lack of blood going to his brain after his taxing imprisonment for the first sentence he uttered in astonishment "You are a little girl!" The red glow in Ami's eyes intensified as her expression turned into a frown, and Jadeite found himself lifted by an invisible force and deposited roughly on his feet. This time, he managed to keep his balance, and quickly batted the dirt from his grey uniform. Where were his manners? He put his right arm across his chest, partly covering the red line that ran down the right side of his jacket, and gave a bow that brought him to about eye-level with the strangely familiar looking sorceress. "Please excuse my initial rudeness, I was not thinking clearly. You already know my name, but I cannot quite place you, Milady. Have we met?"

Ami blinked several times, taken aback by his abrupt change in attitude. "You don't remember me?" The dark general's scratched face remained politely blank. On second thought, they probably hadn't met often enough for him to recognise her out of her uniform. "I'm Sailor Mercury!"

Jadeite went slack jawed as his brain tried to reconcile the ember-eyed girl in front of him with the short-skirted, bubble-throwing defender of love and justice he knew. It was disturbingly easy, now that he knew where to place her. His brow furrowed. "You! I thought I had killed you! You tricked me into agreeing to serve a sailor senshi!" He took a threatening step forward, but the girl didn't flinch. He even thought the corners of her mouth twisted up a bit, which prompted him to stop and take in his surroundings - something that

he should have done the moment he was free, he chided himself. He took note of the bars blocking any escape route, and the group of - were those Mercury lookalikes made of ice? Oh, they moved. Still, they were outside the cage, and the senshi girl was in here with him. Not much to worry about. "Why are you grinning? Do you think your bubbles can stop me, a general of the Dark Kingdom?" He heard a heavy thud behind him and felt a little tremor beneath his feet, so he quickly spun around. Only to stare into a huge, fanged maw, large enough to swallow his head whole. His usually curly blond hair stood on end and then was promptly blown backwards when the dragon roared. Startled, he bounded away on still wobbly legs, botched his landing, and found himself falling over backwards. What in the Great Ruler's name? Senshi weren't supposed to have giant monsters! Unexpectedly, his descent stopped, and he hung uncomfortably in an imbalanced position.

Sailor Mercury was smiling faintly. "You will find that I have graduated from using bubbles. Now lets have a civilised talk, please." It wasn't a suggestion. "I have many questions."

Last edited: Nov 17, 2017

The Newest Recruit

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An uneasy silence reigned in the dungeon as Ami and Jadeite stared at each other, arms crossed over their chests. Neither was sure what to make of the other, and they regarded each other, evaluating how much information they were willing to part with.

Jadeite was the first one to speak. "Could you remove your... pet, please? It is drooling on my head." Despite the sudden angry growl from directly behind him, he managed to keep his face impassive. His long service to Queen Beryl had made him intensely familiar with the possibility of injury and death during audiences with the ruler. In a way, this was just like home. Dark power quivered invisibly within his fingertips, ready to be used against the overgrown lizard should he need to.

Ami nodded slightly in agreement, and the dragon towering behind the dark general disappeared abruptly.

Intriguing. He hadn't even seen her cast a spell. Underestimating the little sailor senshi would be a big mistake, especially when he didn't know what was going on. "I appreciate the gesture." Without the monster breathing down his neck, he dared move around to look at his surroundings more closely. He seemed to be in a prison, with all the dreary paraphernalia, such as chains, iron bars, and water dripping from the damp ceiling that went along with it. With its strange violet lighting coming from crystals set into the bricked walls, it didn't look very much like Tokyo, which would have been his first guess as to where the sailor senshi would have brought him. "Sailor Mercury. If you don't mind me asking, where is this place?"

"You don't know?" A hint of disappointment showed on the blue-haired girl's face, which was quickly replaced by a frown. "It is my base of operations, in a different world than my own. It is your fault that I'm here, you know."

"Hmm? I was not even aware that you had survived the sub-

dimensional collapse," Jadeite said, uncrossing his arms. "In any case, your own meddling caused you to end up here. Which doesn't explain what *I* am doing here."

"Before I answer that, I want to know how you ended up in that crystal in the first place." Ami was staring at him with curiosity.

"Queen Beryl overreacted to a perceived failure and sentenced me to Eternal Sleep, dropping me into the deepest darkness to never return," the blond stated coldly, barely hiding his resentment.

"I would say that I'm sorry to hear that, but I'm mostly relieved that you can't harm my friends any more," Ami answered honestly. "This failure, it wouldn't have to do anything with the scratches on your face? They are still bleeding." She took a step forward and reached out with her right hand, as if to touch Jadeite's cheek.

Startled, the man took a step back and caught the slender hand in his much larger, white-gloved one, stopping it cold. His steel-blue eyes narrowed angrily. "And just what are you trying to do?"

Ami shrank back at his outburst, her hand still trapped in the vice-like grip. "I was just going to heal you!"

"What? Why would you do that?" Jadeite maintained his glare. While he had the girl's fingers in a crushing hold, she would be unable to dodge. All it would take was a short blast of dark energy to her stomach, and he could report back to Beryl and- wait, the bitch had discarded him without a second thought. Upon further consideration, showing up with the corpse of the senshi he had claimed to have killed already wouldn't gain him any favour. To his confusion, his mind shied away from the notion of seeing her dead.

"Because you are my employee and hurt," Ami explained, as if it was the most logical thing in the world.

"What? You were serious about that? Have you forgotten that you are a sailor senshi and I am a dark general?" He let go of her hand, noting how she pulled it away and massaged it with the other.

"You are not a dark general any more. You just told me that you got

yourself fired."

Jadeite gaped. That had not really occurred to him yet. The whole time he had been trapped in the crystal, he had taken it as a given that his only options were either slowly going insane, or being rescued by Beryl and serving her once more. That he could be free, or at least serve a different master, had never crossed his mind. With a start, he realised that he had no plans for the future. Being a general of the Dark Kingdom was as high as one could rise under Beryl, and a dead-end position with few perspectives for improvement.

Taking advantage of his silence, Ami continued, and the red light in her eyes brightened as she spread her arms, palms facing outward, in a gesture that encompassed herself, the prison, and the minions in the room. "And does any of this look like something a typical sailor senshi would be up to? Do *I* still look like a sailor senshi to you?"

Jadeite conceded that out of uniform and with glowing red eyes, he wouldn't have batted an eye if he had seen her in the Dark Kingdom and mistaken her for a very humanoid youma.

"Besides, you agreed to the job, binding yourself magically to me. I wouldn't have been able to get you out of the crystal if it hadn't worked, so..." Ami trailed off, hoping he would get the idea.

Jadeite frowned. He *was* feeling strangely reluctant to attack her, at that. "I see. I would have thought you would be more interested in punishing me, rather than hiring me." Reminding her about their history might not have been the smartest idea, but the entire situation was so surreal that he couldn't help himself. Mercury *had* been able to magically move and hold him, so she could probably do grievous bodily harm too if she so desired.

"Well," Ami sighed deeply, "during my time here, I have come to the conclusion that you aren't that bad." At the blond's incredulous expression, she elaborated "While I was here, I have seen things that make your draining operations look tame in comparison." *not to mentioned engaged in some of them myself*, she thought guiltily. The picture of Malleus's lifeless body rolling down the golden stairs

of his pyramid like a doll with its strings cut came to her mind unbidden. "So I'm willing to let bygones be bygones. Besides, I would be really pleased to have your skills and abilities on board."

"Naturally." Jadeite said in a deadpan tone of voice. "However, I still don't understand why I am here instead of drifting somewhere in the darkness between worlds?" He watched with fascination as the girl's face rapidly changed colour, first paling, then blushing slightly at the question.

"T-the dark gods sent you to me after I sacrificed some energy to them," the teenager blurted out after a moment of hesitation, embarrassed at having to admit this to the former dark general.

As expected, both his eyebrows shot up in surprise, but then he leaned his head back and broke into laughter "Oh, that's rich! I wonder what the other senshi would think about that!"

"I had good reasons!" Ami shouted, sounding upset. "Stop laughing!"

Jadeite sobered and quieted. Forgetting that the slip of a girl was potentially as dangerous to him as Queen Beryl was inviting disaster. "I apologise. From what you told me, I surmise that the energy somehow reached our Great Ruler, Queen Metallia. She must have nudged me your way so I can assist you in collecting more energy, rather than letting Beryl squander my talents. Very well then," Jadeite sank to one knee, bowing formally. "I am yours to command, Lady Mercury." The magic made the gesture feel inexplicably *right*.

Oh, he had managed to fluster the girl again. There she was, blinking, blushing, and covering her mouth with her hand. He might have to serve her, but this had the potential to be at least amusing. It might even be fun to work for a ruler who appreciated his abilities and wouldn't punish him at the slightest provocation. His smile became more shark-like, hidden by his low bow. Who knew, if she had Metallia's favour, maybe he would even be able to get revenge on Beryl. He should try to discreetly steer her in the right direction.

"R-rise Jadeite," Ami said, put off-balance when the man in the grey

uniform with red trimming suddenly knelt in front of her, "and just Mercury is fine!" Queen Metallia? Was the Dark Kingdom backed by a dark god? What did this mean for her world? Could she convince the Light gods to get her home in light of that new information?

"As you wish." Jadeite got up, towering once more before the short-haired girl, a small smirk still playing around his lips.

Ami and her close companions used what had once been Keeper Malleus' inner sanctum as their living and working quarters. The complex of opulent chambers and hallways was segregated from the main bulk of the dungeon by design, having only a few entrances that were locked to the all but a few minions. It was a place where the adventurers and reluctant Keeper could relax without feeling the constant need to watch their backs. Ami had had her reservations about bringing Jadeite here, but given that he could teleport on his own, keeping him out was impossible short of locking him up in a prison cell indefinitely. He did not seem the type who would be put into a more cooperative mood by that, though, and she could use all the help she could get. It was better she kept him around where she could keep an eye on him. Ami intellectually knew that she personally was safe from him as long as he was bound by the dungeon heart's magic, but having him sit on one of the bright leather couches, not three steps away from her, was still making her uneasy. Her companions had no such protection, and she had made it vehemently clear that she would not tolerate him trying anything with them.

Currently, the grey-uniformed man was sitting stiffly and with his arms crossed, staring demonstratively away from her and at the wall, so she could only see his pouting, slightly reddening face in profile.

"You- you got defeated by *Luna*?" Ami did her best to suppress a snicker, but eventually gave up and hid her giggle behind one hand, prompting Jadeite to scowl. "I am sorry," she apologised, "but you have to admit, it is somewhat humorous."

"What is a 'Luna'?" Snyder asked as he stepped into the room,

having only caught the tail end of the conversation. He glanced around, noticing the a blond man in a strange but formal-looking outfit, and recognising him as the person who had been trapped in the crystal Mercury had received from the dark gods. With that origin, Snyder was inclined to distrust this new addition to the dungeon on principle.

"Luna is a cat," Ami explained, still smiling as she turned toward the redhead, holding her hands apart to leave no doubt about the size of the animal. The smile slipped when she saw the acolyte's soot-covered face.

"Is that so?" Snyder shifted his attention back to the uniformed man, looking him up and down. For someone who lost a fight to a house cat, the security precautions Mercury had taken seemed somewhat incongruous. An ice golem stood vigilant in each corner of the square room, where before no guards had been necessary. Focusing on his reason for showing up, he addressed the blue-haired girl again. "Ahem. In any case, I am here to inform you that sadly, the new warding scheme had a minor but deep-seated malfunction. I'm afraid that it will be inevitable to restart its development process at the very beginning."

Ami's expression darkened at the news. From the corner of her eyes, she could see that Jadeite was watching the exchange attentively. "That is unacceptable. Please put up the old one instead as fast possible, I am not willing to let more time pass idly. Jered, please pass along the news that entering the Dungeon Heart Chamber will be forbidden for the foreseeable future, due to chaotic magic contamination."

The two employees nodded and left through the intricately carved wooden door, the sound of their footsteps swallowed by the thick carpet.

Ami turned back to Jadeite. "Well then. I haven't assigned you quarters yet, did I? Please come along, I will show you around while you continue telling me about the Dark Kingdom."

Walking through the recently-conquered palace with her former enemy felt decidedly odd. The hair on the back of Ami's neck never

settled down completely, as if she was still instinctively considering the dark general a threat. Two weeks ago, she couldn't have conceived of showing Jadeite around the brightly-lit halls of her own palace, all the while having a pleasant, if tense, chat with the man. Her familiarity with the place through memories not her own only increased the cognitive dissonance, making her feel as if she was living through a disturbing dream. To Jadeite's credit, he was being impeccably polite now that he wasn't trying to kill her. It made sense if he had spent a lot of time at a royal court. She just never had thought about him having a life outside of enacting evil plots before.

A few hours later, Cathy strode into the common room, holding a stack of annotated maps against the bow of her recently reapplied senshi uniform. "Mercury. I have the latest information on our target right here."

"Another sailor senshi?" an unknown male voice asked from the left. The blonde woman in the white-and blue fuku stopped, eyeing up the stranger standing next to the square table holding the world map, which was a more elaborate version of the one Mercury had had at her initial dungeon. Curly blond hair, a strange grey uniform, and cold eyes stood out as a first impression.

"No," Ami, who was standing with her computer across from him on the other side of the table, shook her head, "she's just using my transformation."

Jadeite's eyes rounded at that. "You have actually found a way to produce more sailor senshi? Metallia help us all." He seemed disgusted by the notion.

Cathy paid no attention to the byplay, and put her papers on the table, shoving them in Ami's direction. "Who's the new guy?" she asked, addressing Mercury, rather than the stranger.

"I am general Jadeite of the Dark Kingdom," he introduced himself, narrowing her eyes at the faux-senshi. Disliking her was a conditioned reflex, triggered by the uniform, even before she had had the gall to ignore him.

"General?" Cathy commented, unimpressed by his frown. "You look barely eighteen. I can't think of a military where one could rise to that position at that age," she hesitated for the merest moment before adding thoughtfully "aside from maybe ours. Hey, did I miss out on a promotion?"

Jered cleared his throat. "Observe how he is floating a finger's breadth above the ground. Maybe he is some kind of magical creature, such as a vampire. For all we know, he could be older than dirt."

The long-haired blonde shrugged, and faced Ami with a mischievous smile "Also, 'Dark Kingdom'? Do you want us to call you 'Queen' now, Mercury?" Cathy teased.

Ami looked startled, then quickly shook her head "No. Jadeite is from a place called the 'Dark Kingdom'. He just hasn't gotten used to his new situation yet."

The dark general in question harrumphed, but didn't protest.

"Well, then, 'general', do you have some valuable strategic advice for the mission?" Cathy asked, with a challenge in her voice.

"I might, if someone saw it fit to update me on the situation. In fact, you haven't even told me what you are up to, Mercury."

Ami realised that he had a point. "Well, right now, we are planning to destroy a neophyte Dungeon Keeper and seize his dungeon heart, because it is close to the coast and- "

"Dungeon Keeper?" Jadeite asked, unfamiliar with the term.

"That's what the rulers of the Underworld are called in this world," Ami briskly informed him, "in any case, seizing this dungeon heart means we can ship it to a place called the Avatar Islands and deploy it, thus gaining a base of operations from which we can conduct the search for a bit of missing lore I need to produce additional dungeon hearts, which I need in order to defeat the other Dungeon Keepers in this world," she took a long breath after the run-on sentence.

"Steal a magical artefact, then conquer the world. Got it." Jadeite

summarised, then smirked when he saw Mercury wince at the way he had worded it. "I must say, this sounds familiar, except for less energy-harvesting being involved."

"The major difference," Mercury said sharply, glaring at him, "is that our targets are not innocents! Never forget that!"

Jadeite inclined his head slightly in acknowledgement, breaking eye contact, but the muscles around his lips twitched in hidden disapproval. "Of course. I would not have expected such an aggressive agenda from a good girl like you, though."

"What I want to do and what I am forced to do are, unfortunately, very different things. I wish I could just find a way home and forget all about this dungeon keeper business, but," Ami looked at the ground, clenching her fists, "there are so many complications that I need to sort out first." Not the least of which was somehow surviving another fight with the Reaper, without the benefit of long range attacks. Ami felt like creeping into a small hole and never coming out again when she only thought about it. However, there was a glimmer of hope for getting home, at least. "Jadeite. Can you still open a portal to the Dark Kingdom?"

Last edited: Nov 17, 2017

Seizing Heart Number 3

Originally on 2009-12-13T21:55:00

"I don't see why not," Jadeite confirmed, and Ami could feel her heartbeat speed up in anticipation. She leaned forward over the table when the grey-clad man sauntered toward the middle of the room, where he had more space. A jolt when through her, banishing her cheerful daydream of walking up the sun-lit stairs to Rei's shrine where Usagi, the black-haired shrine-maiden, and Luna were already waiting for her, all smiling.

"Jadeite, wait!" the cry came from her throat before she had even realised it, prompting a questioningly raised eyebrow from the curly-haired blond. His arm stopped half-way through the motion of opening a gate. Feeling like a child who had just denied herself a tasty treat, Ami explained. "Don't open the portal here. I don't want a portal to the Dark Kingdom anywhere near my dungeon, just in case there is someone on the other side who can track the origin!"

The dark general inclined his head in a shallow bow. "A prudent precaution, but likely unnecessary."

"We shall try this somewhere else," Ami declared. Her outline blurred as she turned into a smoke-like black shadow that whooshed past Jadeite, who ducked in surprise and let out a startled hiss, eyes wide. The black lighting struck one of the motionless golem guards, crackling over the ice rings constituting its armour for the time it took him to blink.

The eye sockets of the statue lit up with crimson light, and she spoke in a watery voice whose speech patterns were identical to Mercury's. "Follow me," she demanded, already yanking the general through space and to the desert above the dungeon. Instead of dropping to the ground and losing his balance, as most of the creatures that Ami transported did, he just stood on thin air. While giving him time to catch is bearing, she wondered whether she would be able to learn that trick. Being able to fly like the clouds had

to be wonderful. She watched for a moment as Jadeite floated higher, looking down at the loose sands with disgust, and blinking in the sudden brightness. His eyes rose to meet hers, but he averted them halfway through the motion, discouraged by the blinding glare of the sun reflecting off of every part of her ice body. Now certain that he was aware of her, she disappeared, re-appearing on top of one of the ashen dunes a few kilometres away. Even with the veil of flowing dust wafting within the valleys between the sand hills, the frozen golem body flared up like diamonds in the sunlight. The dark speck in the distance that was Jadeite turned into a bundle of vertical lines that shot upward and vanished, and the dark general faded back into existence in front of Mercury.

"This way," Ami gestured, pointing with a transparent hand over her shoulder. Ice made grinding noises with the movement, but the sound abruptly stopped when the water-filled simulacrum disappeared, leaving only a near-inaudible popping sound of inrushing air. Having displaced herself the same distance as before, she waited for the blond general to catch up. He appeared with what sounded like an irritated harrumph. "Twenty more jumps like this in the same direction," she said, sounding apologetic.

"Feh. I'll be waiting for you," Jadeite answered, glowing and disappearing with an effect that looked like blurry lines leaping at the sky. Ami's eyes narrowed at the ill-concealed disdain in his voice. Without further ado, she teleported herself after him, cutting down on the total number of hops required by moving herself nearly the maximum distance that her Keeper powers allowed. She just hoped she wouldn't miss the dark general, whose uniform made him blend in with the grey tones of the desert. She needn't have worried. His floating form was a clearly visible black blot against the backdrop of the poisonously green sky, whose colour was an illusion produced by the faint yellow taint of the atmosphere over the corrupted desert. With a last hop, Ami landed in front of the dark general, artificial feet sinking into the hot, shifting sand. Losing the outermost layer of the skin to melting was a decidedly odd, prickly sensation. She was glad that this body wasn't ticklish, or she would have made a decidedly incompetent impression. She bent her neck to look up at the hovering figure, who was descending slowly toward the surface, smirking smugly down at her. Right, so he could teleport better than

her. No need to rub it in. Expertly suppressing a spark of irritation, she said. "Good, you are here. This place should be fine. Go ahead whenever you are ready, please." There was nothing but empty sand for hundreds of kilometres around, so even if the Dark Kingdom managed to track the portal activation back to the origin, they wouldn't find anything useful in the vicinity, she hoped.

Jadeite gave a silent nod to the ice statue that was surrounded with thin streams of fog. Little droplets of water were condensing out of the air and covering Ami's skin, as if the ice itself was sweating. The man raised his right hand to his left shoulder and then made a downward-sweeping gesture that started with a flick of his wrist. When his extended arm came to a rest, it was parallel to the ground, and a black oval opened like a hole in the fabric of space - which was exactly what it was. Ami had no heart that could skip a beat, but the burst of happiness she experienced upon seeing the way home open was nearly enough to run over to Jadeite and give him a hug. Not that she thought he would appreciate it, even if she wasn't a cold and wet ice statue right now. A second later, the gate fully stabilised, and Jadeite's eyes went round. With a roar, a pillar of bright orange lava sprang from the portal and would have clipped the dark general if he hadn't dodged out of its path with a startled and undignified squawk. So narrow was his escape that the white glove on the palm extended toward the portal burst into flame before Jadeite could retract it, and he thrust the limb deep into the sand while skidding down the side of the dune in order to extinguish it. With his concentration broken, the portal disappeared, cutting off the flow of ejecta that was shooting out of it like water from a gardening hose.

Ami stared unblinking and unmoving at the spot where the portal had just been. This did not look like the result that Jadeite had been expecting, as she could hear him hiss in pain from the bottom of the dune. With a well-practiced twist of her mind, the Mercury mini-computer appeared within her hands. Frozen fingers clattered over the tiny keyboard at a breakneck pace while lines of code raced over the display. Heedless of the danger posed by the lava, which was spreading out over the top of the dune like lethal icing on a cake, she continued typing. Soon, the computer let out a beep, indicating that it had found a match. Ami's hopes came crashing down when

she read the line, the disappointment all the more bitter because of her raised expectations. The lava she was analysing, and which by now was nearly touching her feet, had come from the Underworld. Only when the outer layer of her shell started deforming like melting wax from the radiated heat did Ami get a grip on her emotions, and she put some distance between herself and the coating of molten stone.

"Jadeite!" the statue-girl shouted, her voice cold like the hope quenched by the recent development.

"My Queen?" the curly-haired general genuflected on pure reflex upon noting the anger directed at him. It took him a moment to realise that this was not Queen Beryl he was dealing with, but at that point, his knee had already touched the clingy sand. With as much dignity as he could muster, he rose to his feet, brushing the dust off his trousers as he did so, and looked up.

"That portal did not go to the Dark Kingdom, but to the Underworld! I take it that this was not intentional. Can you fix it?" Ami paused when the blond's eyes went wide and his cheeks turned a light pink.

Turning his head aside and picking at his charred glove instead of looking at the animated senshi statue, Jadeite answered "I did everything as usual, so I would have to look into the causes of this first." His lips quivered, as if he was trying to fight down a smirk, and he continued in a carefully neutral tone of voice "Also, it appears that your armour has melted away."

Ami looked down at herself, finding to her great displeasure that the icy chainmail she should have been wearing had - unsurprisingly - not survived the proximity to glowing lava, and of course, the golem had only regenerated her skin, not her clothing. "Eeep!" She had been flashing Jadeite! This wasn't her real body, but it was shaped just like it! Despite having been in this situation before, being seen naked by someone she knew made the embarrassment much, much worse. What would he be thinking of her now? He didn't even know that there was a good reason for her ice simulacrums to look just like her! Oh, this was so embarrassing. She wished she could sink into the ground, but had to settle for the next best thing, and teleported away. This was so stupid! She should have possessed

one of the golems in a nurse uniform instead! The more logical part of her pointed out that the fabric would have caught fire, but she wasn't inclined to listen. Fixing the issue of the golems looking like her down to the smallest detail had just increased in priority. Hidden behind a large dune of sand, Ami slumped her shoulders and sighed. She closed her eyes in concentration, focusing on the mental image of baggy pants and a shirt, and pushed her magic into it. With a rustle, the cloth wrapped around her, conforming to her vision.

"So we are done here then?" Jadeite asked bemusedly, standing all alone in the desert. The senshi-possessed automaton re-appeared in front of him, dressed in blue garb that convinced the dark general that whatever else Sailor Mercury was, a talented tailor she was not. "I see you have sorted out your wardrobe malfunction," he commented. Beryl would have punished him severely for a jibe like that, but the statue just stiffened uncomfortably and otherwise ignored it. Oh yes, he could get used to this.

"It seems you are stuck here in this world then, same as me?" Ami asked, getting over her mortification. At least she couldn't blush in this colourless body.

Jadeite shrugged indifferently. "For the time being."

"You sound very nonchalant about the news," Ami shifted her weight, looking at the blond general with interest. "Don't you have anyone at home whom you will miss?"

Was there anyone he would miss? Beryl? He let out an involuntary snort at the very concept, surprising the girl watching him. Seeing that his reaction would require some explanation, he pre-empted the inevitable questions. "Who should I be missing? Beryl? Life is safer without her. The other generals? Nephrite is a rival who envies me my position, Zoisite is a treacherous snake, and Kunzite isn't much better. The youmas?" Jadeite made a dismissive hand movement to communicate just how ridiculous *that* notion was.

"It sounds like a sad and lonely existence," Mercury answered after a while, her posture shifting to a more sympathetic one.

Jadeite's laughed. "Lonely? Who cares, I don't need others!" Noting the statue's pitying gaze, he scowled. "I wouldn't expect a little girl like you to understand. Now, was there anything else?"

Ami shook her head, and with a wistful look over her shoulder at the cooling lava where the failed portal had been, she ordered "Let's go back."

Keeper Malleus had owned a command centre of sorts that had allowed him to project his presence to far away dungeons. That way, he could lead operations from the comfortable safety of his home, reclining on the heap of soft, velvet cushions taking up the centre of the small chamber. Ami had no remote base of operations, and so she had no use for the room. Even if she did, she wouldn't have enjoyed staying in a place that reminded her of all the meticulously planned and executed atrocities that the late Keeper had been master-minding from the small, tomb-like shrine. While the Light gods had helped ease the burden of the foreign memories, there were limits to how many reminders Ami was willing to subject herself to. The opulent den where Malleus had plotted his evil deeds was far beyond these limits. However, Ami recognised that the concept of a command centre was sound, and instructed her imps to dig out a new, square room below the deepest reaches of her dungeon.

The blue-haired senshi stood at the entrance to the spacious cavern, letting her eyes wander over the make-shift arrangement of equipment and furniture. Some mismatch was unavoidable, as none of the pre-existing patterns for rooms addressed her requirements precisely. She had started out with a library, which certainly had nothing to do with her love of books. Really. In contrast with most other standard dungeon rooms, libraries were brightly lit to allow for an easy reading experience. The short-haired girl's gaze wandered upwards, towards the lamps. In each of the four corners of the room stood a pedestal that nearly reached the vaulting ceiling. On each rested a Mercury symbol as large as the young Keeper's head, blazing with white light and banishing the shadows from the room. Ami found it a vast improvement over the crystal skulls that the old library used, even if the proud display of her ownership clashed with her self-effacing nature. Under her feet, the thick orange carpet that

had come with the library muffled the sound of her footsteps. Keeping the noise level down was another advantage, albeit a minor one. Any shelves and books had been removed from the chamber, leaving it bare to make room for more useful furniture, such as the enormous glass tank that formed the looming centrepiece of the chamber.

Ami approached the water-filled cube that had roughly the same dimensions as a room in a modern apartment. Jadeite was gazing into the depths of the aquarium-like structure, studying its contents. The young Keeper had finally found a use for her fully liquid golems. Their sad tendency to dissolve into flat and useless puddles did not exist within an aquatic environment, where they could stay coherent and survive as shape-shifting blobs. She had created a large number of them from various dyes, and now a stylised, three dimensional map of the target dungeon floated within the container's confines, formed by transparent brown box shapes and cylinders that signified rooms and hallways. A large number of finger-sized fluid golems in red, green, and blue tones covered the bottom of the tank, waiting for the moment when they would be called upon to symbolise the location of allied and enemy units on the map.

"It is a rather inefficient design", Jadeite said, turning to Ami when she approached. "If you wanted an easily-updated map, you should use illusions."

"I will keep that in mind for when I have time to learn some illusion spells," the girl answered, not letting her upbeat mood be ruined. "Cathy, are there any problems?" She turned to the long-haired blonde, who was sitting behind a semi-circular desk which was covered in more traditional maps. From the woman's elevated position on a dais resting against the back wall, and from which she could oversee the rest of the room, it was clear that she was occupying the command chair. As if to underline her prominent rank, long blue drapes with the Mercury symbol in white hung from the ceiling to her left and right. Ami hadn't specified those when she had designed the room, but apparently, her magic had deemed them appropriate. To her, they looked like the kind of decoration one would have found in Nazi Germany, except in the wrong colour and with the wrong symbol. It really hinted at what she thought about her

new occupation.

"Nothing that should put us off schedule," Cathy answered. "The map corresponds to the latest divined intelligence. The warlocks could have used more rest after their illness, but this won't be strenuous work, so they should not pass out on us."

Ami followed the swordswoman's gaze toward the line of dark magicians standing against the right wall, each one next to a single, melon-sized eye on an organic-looking stalk that grew from the floor. The odd contraptions looked alive, twisting and turning randomly while staring at things only they could see. Ami shuddered upon spotting the unsightly things. She had no idea how they worked, but knew that they were used to send corruptive dreams and whispers to prospective recruits in order to entice them into joining the Keeper's side. Ami figured that, if they could do that, they could also serve as send-only radios, enabling the six wizards to transmit instructions to golems in the field, effectively remote-controlling them. This would hopefully work out better than her having to split her attention between fighting, analysing things, staying alive, and giving the soldiers vague instructions that they would then interpret with their imp-sized intellects.

"Snyder also assures me that those mana batteries he designed are good for at least a hundred scrying spells," Cathy continued, her tone indicating just how low her opinion of the redhead's promises was. The acolyte was currently darting about along the benches on the left side of the room, adjusting lumpy, rune-covered objects that emitted sparks from time to time. A gaggle of cables ran from the storage devices toward a row of six crystal balls resting on the long bench close to the glass cube, manned by a warlock each. Metal stands holding the two largest scrying devices stood separate from the others, one to each side of the aquarium. Two coiled sculptures resembling Eastern dragons loomed behind them, their gaping maws pointed directly at the orbs. Glaring light shot from their mouths, projecting the image shown by the spheres onto the white surface of the far wall. The images were somewhat distorted by the curvature of the crystal balls and the uneven light produced by the ersatz diascopes, but they were certainly detailed enough to give the warlocks in charge of tele-operating the golems a clear idea of the

situation. Ami nodded in satisfaction. Everything seemed to be in order.

"Anyway, why does Sailor Fake get overall command for this operation? I have prior experience!" Jadeite complained, shooting a sour look toward the other blonde.

Ami suppressed a sigh. "You have a task that makes use of your more unique talents," she explained. "Once I start the attack, the enemy Keeper will react by moving his troops to intercept mine, which will allow me to discern his location. I will call out the map cube he is in and one of the warlocks will scry it." This was a bit harder than it sounded. She wondered if no previous dungeon keeper had felt the need to assault a location far away from their dungeon, or if this was a weakness unique to Malleus. The lack of a spell that allowed the Keeper to communicate with his minions from neutral territory was one of the glaring holes in the powerset she had inherited. In any case, an imp with a slate, chalk, and Jered to keep an eye on the creature would serve as workaround until she could find an appropriate spell. The imp would know what Ami wanted it to write, and the wavy haired man could read it aloud. She returned her attention to Jadeite.

"I want you to look at the picture in the crystal ball, identify the Keeper, and then teleport over and destroy him." Her voice became more insistent. "Please, just show up, attack, and immediately return here, regardless of the outcome. I can't stress enough how dangerous Keepers are and how important it is that you don't give him time to react. No introductions, no grandiose gestures - just pop in and fire away. The slightest delay means that he will teleport away and counter-attack. So take no chances!"

With growing irritation, Ami noted that Jadeite looked unconvinced. "I think you are rather underestimating my abilities. I *was* a general of the Dark Kingdom, after all."

The blue-haired girl opened her mouth to protest, but closed it again as she decided to save her breath. Maybe a demonstration would be more helpful here. Without a warning, the curly-haired blond found himself in the pressing heat of the desert. He glanced around, seeing nothing interesting through the heat flickers. Suddenly, the

dune next to him exploded as if a bomb had gone off inside. He could see white-hot spears of fire shoot from cracks opening in the sandy hillside as it bulged outward like a bursting balloon. A wall of sand surfed the shockwave preceding the firestorm blossoming outward from the epicentre of the explosion, barrelling down on the dark general. Reflexively, he raised his arm to protect his face, and was suddenly back within the command centre, staring wide-eyed at Mercury.

"That was a spell the Keeper I seized this dungeon from was fond of," Ami explained with an amused smile at the sand-covered state of Jadeite's uniform. "It's not something one can use in quick succession, but it is an example of what Keepers can throw at you on their own territory. Thus, it is best for you to use hit and run tactics." The dark general was looking at her as if she had grown a second head, his face ashen, and not from the sand trickling out of his hair.

"Very well," he gulped. "I shall follow your instructions to the letter." *And work on my shields.* The attack was nothing to sneeze at, but he thought he could fend it off if it didn't go off right in his face, which it had the potential to do, unfortunately.

"Good," Ami nodded. "Please keep up the pressure even if the first attack fails. If the Keeper has to worry about his own survival, he won't be able to effectively fight off me and the troops when we go after the dungeon heart." She walked up the stairs to Cathy's seat, and addressed all her employees at once in a loud voice, drawing all gazes in the room, which in turn prompted a short battle with her shyness. Shyness won handily, and the motivational speech she had prepared was abandoned in favour of a quick mission statement "I will travel to the enemy dungeon now. Stand ready to support the attack as soon I give the signal!"

With these words, she turned into coils of black energy that shot upward through the ceiling, seeking out the closest golem.

Once Ami was gone, Snyder made his way over to Cathy's seat. "Well, well. Now we wait. Actually, how comes that you are wearing that indecent outfit again? My ward on the dungeon heart should prevent the uniforms from forming, and I refuse to believe that it

failed so quickly!"

The swordswoman-turned-commander swivelled her chair around, narrowing her eyes at the acolyte. "Such confidence in your abilities. Nevertheless, the ward holds for now. This is an old uniform that I put on after Mercury re-applied the enchantments."

Snyder looked baffled. "But why? I thought you hated the embarrassing thing."

"It has grown on me. Besides, Jered likes it," she snapped with a slight blush. "And it is a layer of protection for my normal identity. You remember how these enchantments make the uninitiated think that they are looking at a different person? I figure that that wouldn't work so well if I wore the same garb in both forms."

"But, you know, everyone here is calling you by name, so..." the acolyte pointed out a glaring flaw with that plan.

"Obviously. I'm not trying to keep my identity secret from anyone here. I simply don't want to cause any more grief to my family by becoming known as a high-ranking servant of a dungeon keeper, just in case someone uses divination magic on this place. That is bound to happen once Mercury becomes more infamous, and the disguise is going to work just fine against that." She glared at the acolyte, as if daring him to contradict her. The redhead wisely remained silent, maybe detecting the hints of sadness in her blue eyes.

Ami's journey toward the west coast of the continent took longer than the one to the desert had taken, because she was teleport-hopping across more densely-settled territory. After leaving the desolate region around her dungeon, the land became a beautiful patchwork of green forests and lush meadows, interspersed with farms, towns, and cities. Ami didn't have time to properly admire the landscape, as she was transporting herself from cover to cover, keeping the sparkly ice body she was inhabiting out of sight of the population. It would be inconsiderate to worry and startle the people, even if there was nothing they could do about her, and so Ami only

appeared in deep shadows behind rocks and trees, keeping to the less inhabited areas. After more line-of-sight jumps than she bothered to count, she appeared on top of a sparsely forested hill that provided a good view of the rolling ocean in the distance. The countryside sloped downward slowly, forming a shallow valley through which a wide stream meandered. Ami's gaze followed the white-sailed trading ships that travelled down the river toward the large coastal city that it split into two parts. Though calling the white-walled settlement a city was not doing it justice. With the many ramparts and towers crowning the four-storey high walls it was more of a fearsome citadel. Warships shared the bustling port with large-bellied galleons, while sea gulls cried in the air.

Ami consulted the maps within her dungeon remotely, confirming that the area looked familiar for a reason. The city was the one that Cathy's intelligence-gathering efforts had revealed in the crystal ball, situated about eight kilometres downstream from the enemy Keeper's dungeon. She knew that the underground fortifications of the well-fortified citadel matched or even exceeded those above ground, but it was the only major settlement in the area, which had to make it the enemy's target. Jered speculated that the fiend was still building his army, which consisted mostly of goblins. They were training day and night with a fervour that Ami had never managed to instil in the green rabble that had served her. This was utterly unsurprising, as his methods made the senshi feel physically ill. Each day, he held a fighting tournament where the large-eared little critters displayed their skills. Those who came last were thrown into the prison and left to starve, slowly building the Keeper's army of skeletons and motivating the rest to do even better. Despite the stomach-turning methods, his approach was producing results. From short glances in the crystal ball, Ami had drawn the unflattering conclusions that the very best of the tiny green monsters could most likely mop the floor with her in close combat. This reminded her that she would have to fight the Reaper again in the near future, but she didn't want to dwell on those bleak perspectives right now.

Regardless of the fighting prowess of the goblins, Ami suspected that the key to the enemy's plan were the undead, which already outnumbered his living troops. They needed neither food nor sleep

nor payment, but most importantly, they did not need to breathe. If Ami was plotting an assault on the city, which she most emphatically was not, she would simply walk the skeletons along the bottom of the river, bypassing the cities' fortifications and causing havoc before its defenders would know what hit them. The heavy grate that blocked the stream after twilight was intended to stop boats trying to sneak into the city in the dead of night, and skeletons were slim enough to pass through its gaps. So were goblins, even if they would have to squeeze through with some effort. However, as an avenue of attack, the river could be used both ways.

Ami teleported across the landscape, toward the location of the enemy dungeon, and plunged into the river. Water sparkled in the sunlight when her slender body pierced the stream's surface. Surrounded by air bubbles, her golem body sank slowly deeper, and she had to summon her visor to remain able to see in the dimming light. Among hair-like swaying algae, she concentrated. Back in her dungeon, the existing golems turned into inert ice sculptures as she withdrew the magic that sustained them. She would need it all to to create the new ones. With a muttered spell that sounded weird in the aquatic medium, the first of her simulacrums appeared before her, immediately making swimming motions to maintain position within the flowing water. She repeated the process thirteen times, bringing the number of animated statues to fifteen, including the one she was possessing. This, experimentation had revealed, was the largest number she could sustain while also maintaining five senshi forms - herself, Cathy, and soon three of the golems. Three flashes of blue light momentarily lit the murky depths of the river, frightening the fishes away. During the short bursts of brightness, Ami could see that the surrounding flora had been overcome by foulness and was rotting away into brown and yellowish remains. The corruption of the enemy dungeon heart was somehow being channelled into the waters, it seemed, which carried it out into the ocean. That's one way to keep the base hidden, Ami thought, worrying about what the contaminated waters would do to the citizens. It was long past time that she dealt with this Keeper.

A scratching noise made Jered look up. The imp in charge of

communication was writing on its slate. "Everyone! Mercury is in position!"

The room started bristling with activity at the announcement. Long-robed warlocks hurried to their posts, and crystal balls flared up with bright light. Within the large aquarium, green dots moved up from its bottom; amoeba-like miniature golems taking position on the map squares to indicate the position of Ami's troops. Three groups of five were moving across the stylized rooms, each one led by a larger green dot representing an empowered statue in senshi form.

"Group at grid cube three-three-five onto left screen, the group at grid cube eight-zero-two on the right one!" Cathy shouted. "The Keeper is leading the third group herself. Get to work!" She glowered at the warlocks gripping the strange eye-things by their stalks, and they began instructing their charges. On the screens, golems rushed through freshly-hewn gaps in the dungeon's walls, concealed by a thick but selective fog. Of the three incursions, Mercury's own had started at the lowest level, breaking in from the river. As Cathy watched the map, a group of red dots that had been observing the crystal balls detached themselves from the glass and floated upward to form a veritable forest of red in one of the Chambers in the young Keeper's path. "Inform Mercury that there's a clump of hostiles waiting for her in the next room, advise that the route to the left appears to be lightly defended," she shouted to the closest warlock, who nodded and started mumbling into his beard. Strange whispers emanated from the twitching eyeball in his hands while it relayed the message. On the screens, the animated statues were meeting resistance when goblins started to appear from thin air, surrounding them.

"Instruction from Mercury: Enemy Keeper at seven-seven-three," Jered's voice echoed loudly through the hall as he read the imp's slate.

"Scan it with crystal ball three. Jadeite, he's all yours!" Cathy instructed, still observing the map, where activity was becoming more hectic. She could see the red dots that obstructed Mercury's path clump up near a door, but unable to pass, while the green spots representing her squad were moving along the alternate route. She must have buried the doors under ice, Cathy figured. Movement

from above distracted her momentarily as the dark general floated over to the indicated scrying device and bowed over it, gazing into its depths before disappearing from the room altogether. On the right screen, a golem disintegrated under a lightning bolt from out of nowhere, spraying jets of superheated vapour from its bursting joints.

A blond figure clad in a grey uniform with red trimming shimmered into existence in a practical, but well-decorated chamber within the coastal dungeon. Jadeite appeared with a sphere of blackness already hovering above his hand. Sensing the danger somehow, his green-skinned, long-eared quarry turned its head, red eye-slits widening as it spotted the hovering figure. The black comet was already streaking toward the surprised Keeper, and Jadeite smirked when the figure messily burst apart under the impact. Piece of cake. His amusement died down when a thread of darkness wafted from the smoking corpse, glared at him from the red pinpricks that were its eyes, and darted away through a wall. Remembering Mercury's warning, he teleported out, turning into black vertical lines split-seconds before angry arcs of electricity arced down through the space he had just occupied and scoured deep gouges into the floor tiles.

Ami was pressing herself against the wall left of a closed door with two wings. A large block of ice containing four frozen-in skeletons was screeching down the corridor, propelled by three of her golems that were pushing against it. The transparent bodies were leaning into the work so hard that they were nearly parallel to the floor as their legs pumped furiously. The large, sliding mass gained speed. Waiting for the right moment, Ami pulled the door open, taking one of the steel wings while a second golem opened the other. Their concerted effort cleared the path for the speeding ice block, which barrelled onward and into a group of would-be ambushers, sending skeletons and bones flying like bowling pins. Having advanced warning was coming in useful. Ami was about to give the order to move on when a ghost-like image of Jadeite appeared in her field of vision. "Problems, Mercury," the wavering picture spoke with a

heavily-distorted voice, "the Keeper refused to properly die when I killed him."

Ami listened to his description of what happened, and frowned. "He must be possessing creatures. Just keep hunting him. He should be..." her fingers raced over the keyboard of the palmtop computer suddenly in her hands, " ... in section eight-eight-seven. Get to it!"

"Very well," with a token bow, the projection disappeared, leaving Ami to her own devices.

"Jadeite, go get the Keeper in nine-sev- no, dammit, he disappeared." Cathy stared at the map

"Keeper at, eh, three-four-three?" a male voice shouted from the left, where a warlock looked up from his crystal ball, his face a network of shadowy lines in its unfavourable light. "At least, some red-eyed skeleton just popped into my image, and-"

"Noted. Jadeite, you heard him," the scarred blonde's hair whipped around as she returned her attention to the map, not even watching the dark general teleport out once more. "Mercury's team seems to have reached the dungeon heart. Get me an image of it on the - " she paused. The second squad was down to two surviving Mercury statues. "- left screen, right now!"

At her order, the scene on the wall changed to an overhead view of the enemy's dungeon heart chamber. All of its entrances were frozen shut, which neatly locked out most of the defenders. Naturally, the Keeper was still throwing minions in, but that allowed Mercury to get a bead on his location, and between freezing the in-dropping enemies, she was calling in the Keeper's new coordinates at a breakneck pace. By now, Jadeite wasn't even bothering to return to the command centre. He appeared from time to time in one of the crystal balls, sweating and firing bolts of dark energy at his target as he chased the enemy commander around.

Meanwhile, Ami was holding her position next to the beating dungeon heart of the enemy, defending the imps she had

summoned from attack. She spared a nervous glance at the three holes in the floor that indicated where the bug-eyed minions had slowly made their way downward into the rock. The distraction nearly cost her, and she lost her left hand to the hacking sabre of a swift and muscular goblin before one of her servants fired a salvo of frozen fingers into its back, stunning it long enough for her to kick it aside. Even though domes of ice protected the entrance leading down to the imps, the enemy Keeper could have destroyed the small servants undermining his dungeon heart with little effort. Fortunately, Jadeite was distracting him. While the arm stump regenerated, Ami watched the imps' progress. The ground underneath her feet crumbled away from a pick strike, and her ice body dropped to the cavern that the little demonic servants were excavating below the active artefact. A wide cylinder protruding from the ceiling denoted the pit that contained the beating heart. "Shabon Spray Freezing!" Ami looked at her handiwork. A thick layer of ice was now supporting the dungeon heart from below, separating it from the rocky ground. "Good! Excavate a trench around it! Disconnect it completely from the surrounding rock!" Her visor was giving her the newest location of the enemy, which she faithfully transmitted to the command centre. Soon now... Yes! The last piece of ceiling connecting the beating heart of the enemy to his territory crumbled away, completing the circular ditch around it. Now the entire construct was only resting on the pedestal of ice she had created, severing its connection with the rest of the dungeon. She could already see the lights fade as their power source was disconnected. More importantly, the enemy Keeper could no longer teleport at will anywhere but into this room, unless he possessed an imp which - darn it! - he just had. It was not logical for a Keeper to leave his sole remaining dungeon heart undefended and in the hands of an enemy, but apparently, this one had figured that if she hadn't destroyed it yet, she was not going to any time soon. What was she supposed to do now?

"Enemy minions are retreating toward the portal," a hoarse voice echoed in her mind.

"Let them, but cordon off all routes to the dungeon heart. Chase any enemies you can find through the portal, or destroy them. None must remain." the imp back in the command centre scribbled on his

slate, "and send me Jadeite over here."

Getting rid of all enemy minions was an unfortunate necessity. She knew from her stolen memories that the possession spell did not work across different realms of existence, and thus all minions within the Underworld would no longer be valid emergency refuges for the Keeper she was fighting. Besides, she wasn't keen on leaving them to their own devices within densely-settled territory.

Moments later, the former dark general appeared, panting lightly from the exertion of the chase. He looked questioningly over the ice golems until his gaze came to rest on the one whose eyes glowed red. "Mercury," he greeted.

"Change of plans," Ami informed him, while typing away furiously on her palmtop while scanning the dungeon heart. "The enemy Keeper is fleeing in an imp body. Maybe he thinks he can create a new heart before I decide to destroy this one. I can track the invisible link binding him to this artefact, but he can teleport as far as I can in one hop, so I can't catch up to him."

Jadeite scratched his chin. "I see where you are going with this, but I can't track him on my own. Can your staff in the command centre?"

Ami shook her head, making the water within gurgle. "I'm afraid not. You will have to carry me", she continued, her entire body language speaking of the misgivings she had about that course of action.

High in the sky, an indistinct blurry lump appeared, solidifying into two distinct shapes clinging to each other.

"Yow! Get that ice away from my neck!" Jadeite complained, grimacing and shivering.

"I'd like to, but I can't move! I can't even look in the right direction! Wait, let me shift my weight." Ami was draped over the blond's shoulders in a fireman's carry and not at all happy with the situation, if the way her legs were kicking was any indication. "Ah! I'm sliding off!"

"It was *your* genius idea to hold onto me while still in a body made of ice! Hold still!"

"I can't! Eeek! Catch me!"

One barely avoided accident and much struggling later, Ami was awkwardly pressed to Jadeite's chest while being carried bridal style. Studiously ignoring the feeling of his arms holding her, she turned her head, scanning the landscape through her visor, and said "Much better."

"Maybe for you," Jadeite grumbled, "I'm still freezing over here. Let's get this over with."

"Yes," Ami nodded, "See that lake on the horizon? He's around there."

The duo disappeared, only to reappear hovering over the large body of water. The ice girl consulted her computer again. "He is hiding in that copse of trees. I don't think he is aware that I can track him."

"Where exactly?"

"Close to the centre, about half-way on the line between the meadow and the higher pines," Ami indicated, holding the monitor of her computer so that Jadeite could see it.

The dark general bared his teeth in an unfriendly grin. "Understood. Hold on tight."

Ami nearly let out a startled squeak when the arm supporting her back disappeared, and wrapped her arms around the taller man's chest on pure reflex. He extended his free hand towards a large, flat boulder not far from the copse, and bands of white lightning leapt from his fingers, fading somewhere in mid-air before they reached their target. While Ami wondered what that was supposed to accomplish, the rock shuddered and rose into the air slowly, raining down crumbs of dirt and soil. Jadeite moved his arm in an arc, and the boulder followed the motion, until it was hovering high above the target location. Its shadow was out on the waters of the lake, a dark spot where the waves did not glitter in the sunlight. The dark general

opened his hand, and gravity took over. A cacophony of splintering noises produced by trees being squished preceded the thundering thumping noise by a mere instant. A ripple went through the treetops from the tremor caused by the impact, which Jadeite commented with a sardonic "Splat."

"Enemy dungeon heart has gone inert," the distorted voice of a warlock informed Ami.

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Shipping Preparations

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The subterranean chamber housing the inert dungeon heart should have been pitch-black. It would have been, were it not for the white orb floating above the wide circle of runes decorating the inert heart's stone cover. The faint light crept over the surface of the wall, giving the dark-coloured stone a slimy, lichen-covered appearance. Two shadows, cast by a tall and a shorter figure standing next to each other, formed elongated darker blots in the wetly gleaming patterns. The larger shadow was more solid, as if the person casting the smaller one was lacking substance. The given impression was wrong, even if Ami's golem body contained more liquid than solid matter and was lacking in the opacity department. The young Keeper was not paying attention to the intricate refraction patterns that the light reflecting within the icy curves of her borrowed form was tracing; instead her crimson gaze was locked onto the black depths of the uneven, circular trench that disconnected the conquered dungeon heart from its surroundings. A faint smile of satisfaction played around her lips at the sight, as it proved that she was one small step closer to her goals, and, more importantly, that there was one dungeon keeper less who would hurt innocents. Her eyes darted to one of the prone forms lying motionless in the corner for a moment, and her fingers twitched, as if they were trying to clench into fists. The loss of life was regrettable, even if the enemies were reprehensible creatures. However, this was war, and she had never lost any sleep over the fate of the youmas that had battled the other sailor senshi and her, so she would not start now. Ami just hoped her conscience thought so, too.

"So this is what we fought for," Jadeite said loudly to make himself heard over the clamour of picks striking rock in the unlit ditch below. The dark general's eyes were shadowed by his curly blond bangs, but Ami was sure that they were fixing the room-sized cylinder that contained the unclaimed dungeon heart. "I was expecting something less bulky. What are you planning to do with it?"

"It needs to be moved to a new location," Ami stated, deep in thought while watching her imps smooth the wheel-shaped magical object. She abruptly turned her head to stare directly up at Jadeite with red-glowing eyes. "I remember you teleporting away entire buses to somewhere else. Could you move this to its destination the same way?"

The dark general's posture shifted subtlety, his confidently thrust-out chest retracting even as he shook his head. "Actually, that was the youma's work, and she was simply moving the vehicle through a pre-existing portal into extra-dimensional space that was still in the same relative location." He glanced over at the semi-transparent body of the senshi, already resigning himself to now having to explain complex arcano-physical concepts to a schoolgirl. He was pleasantly surprised to see her nod instead, touching her chin with her right hand as she thought it over. "I could *lift* it, but taking something that massive along on a teleport is out of the question."

"It can't be helped, then. I will have to use my original plan." The ice senshi returned her gaze to the innocent-looking dungeon heart. "Lift it, you say? That will help already." Reassessing her designs for a moment, she turned back to Jadeite and smiled at him. "You have my thanks for your good work during the assault. This would have been a lot more difficult without you."

The blond man stood a bit straighter, unused to being the recipient of praise from superiors, even if the one giving it was just a little girl. An arrogant smirk appeared on his face as he inclined his head and put his right hand on his uniformed chest in a shallow bow. "I am glad *someone* appreciates my talents, at last."

Feeling a bit uneasy at his gesture, Ami returned her attention to the task of moving the large stone cylinder to the beach somehow. A brief touch of a finger to her left ear caused her visor to appear, shifting the red light from her eyes more into the violet spectrum. "Now, you can see this gap in the western wall that my imps are digging? The plan is to..."

Transporting a massive dungeon heart was a daunting undertaking,

but Ami had quickly realised that there was a way to reduce the amount of work required enormously with the application of a simple trick. Well, simple if one had a convenient dark general at hand who could levitate the huge stone cylinder, rotate it in mid-air, and put it cautiously down on its edge. She suspected that she might not have found the trick quite as simple if she had been forced to rely on imps, ramps, and carefully added and removed portions of gravel. Nevertheless, once the inert dungeon heart stood vertically on its edge instead of resting horizontally on the ground, she had taken advantage of its smooth round shape and rolled it into a freshly hewn-out slit in the dungeon wall, similar to inserting it into an oversized coin slot. The narrow walls prevented it from toppling, and the interaction of gravity with the mild incline of the tunnel ensured that the massive artefact pretty much moved itself. Whenever the imps removed the last bit of rock impeding the huge millstone-shaped device's progress, it rumbled forward through the shower of debris, grinding what little rock remained in the wake of the bug-eyed minions into dust.

Ami looked up at the ceiling, which was gleaming with wetness. Now and then, she heard the unmistakable noise of a droplet of water dripping down and striking the ground. Was she too far already? If one dug a downward-leading tunnel toward the coast, one would eventually end up underneath the ocean. Her calculations showed that the rock here should still be thick enough to bear the pressure of the salty tides weighting on it, but she found it hard to argue with the hairline cracks forming above. Putting her Mercury computer away, she transported herself straight upward, appearing slightly higher above the calm sea than she had planned. While plummeting toward the waters, she could see that by now, the moon was hanging in the sky, casting a long, white reflection onto the waves and making her feel a pang of homesickness. Just before the greenish waters closed above her head with a splash, she caught a glimpse of the citadel-like city on the shore, distant, but not as distant as she would have liked. Her tunnel must have been by a degree or so off, she estimated while sinking deeper among the dancing bubbles. It was dark, and the lanterns and cooking fires burning in the harbours and on the decks of the anchored ships

should have ruined any potential observers' night vision, so she felt that she was taking no additional risk by going ahead with her project despite the inconvenience.

Making swimming motions, Ami worked her way slowly deeper toward the bottom of the ocean, which was not so far away yet this close to the coast. Her body consisted of sweet water and ice, both of which were lighter than the surrounding salt water, and so she had to fight against her own buoyancy. At least until she remembered that her own body counted as her territory, as far as the Keeper powers were concerned, and teleported some stones inside the fluid-filled cavity that constituted most of the golem. Having those foreign objects roll around within her shell was a decidedly strange feeling, especially as she had been diving head-first, and the rocks naturally gravitated toward the lowest point. It gave an entire new meaning to the word 'top-heavy'. After sorting out those initial troubles, the weights finally rested in her feet where they belonged, and she was drifting slowly into the near-lightless depths that no human had seen before. It did not take very long at all for her to reach the ground and sink up to the ankles into the brown sludge. Ami turned slowly in a circle to survey her surroundings through her visor. She appeared to be standing on a drab mud-coloured plain that sloped slightly toward the deeper ocean to the vest. The inactive dungeon heart in the underground below was around twenty metres further to the left instead of directly underneath, which could be explained by a current in the water that had displaced her to the right while she descended. Everything seemed to be in order.

It was time to start the next phase of her plan. Ami didn't know whether the artefact could survive the force of pressurised sea water suddenly rushing into its tunnel, and she was not about to find this out through experimentation. She flipped her mental view to the corridor below her feet, where her imps were patiently waiting in the darkness for new instructions. She moved her remaining golems to the little bug-eyed servants. With great enthusiasm, the animated ice statues tore the magical picks from the smaller minions' grasps, heedless of their squealed protests. Ami frowned in distaste. It seemed that even her own creations enjoyed bullying their smaller cousins. Unimportant in the great scheme of things as this was, it

still reminded her that she was working with the tools of the bad guys. Not that the imps themselves would behave any better if they had half a chance, of course. They only suffered from the disadvantage of constituting the very bottom rank of the dungeon's pecking order.

Letting out a sigh that freed a few pearly bubbles into the surrounding sea, Ami summoned the now tool-wielding golems to her side and gave her instructions. Under her watchful gaze, the constructs swam further ahead into the same direction that the underground tunnel was leading, their transparent bodies nearly invisible in the murky darkness. When they had passed the end of the tunnel by around fifty metres, they let themselves sink toward the muck and started swinging their picks, looking as if they were moving in slow motion due to the water resistance. Clouds of dirt fountained upward from the deepening hole, drifting in the slow current like a curtain. Ami had her minions excavate a cone-shaped cavern, wide at the bottom, narrow at the top, before she went to work herself, using the Shabon Spray Freezing spell over and over again to gradually turn the contents of the new cave into ice. It floated upwards as soon as it formed, but Ami had already taken this behaviour into account and corrected for it with the shape of the place. The rising ice got stuck within the narrower top part of the tapering room and could not escape to the surface. Slowly but surely, the cone of ice grew until no seawater remained within the confines of the chamber, and Ami was enclosed within a tiny liquid-filled bubble at its deepest point.

The young Keeper teleported herself back into the corridor containing the inert dungeon heart and looked up at the waiting stone cylinder. At her command, the imps resumed their work, extending the tunnel into the direction of the cone of ice. Standing in a puddle of salty water, Ami watched the inactive dungeon heart slowly roll forward, hot on the heels of the diggers. All of a sudden, the hard clangs of metal striking rock changed in quality, becoming more muffled when the picks struck ice instead of stone. Some leftover cold liquid remained in pockets between ice and underground and trickled down into the new opening, pooling up until the imps were wading through knee-high water. The little workers grunted and panted with exertion as they pushed the

dungeon heart until it was firmly embedded in the centre of the ice. Happy with their progress, Ami removed them from the room before using her magic to seal the artefact in under yet more ice. Above, her golems were already digging away the ceiling that was keeping the ice from ascending. A shudder went through the enormous block as the ground confining it crumbled away, and then the Ami felt a moment of instinctive terror at the sight of a wall of seawater thundering towards her when the icy plug ascended out of the way. She quickly teleported before the torrent could smash her borrowed body into pieces, blinking from place to place as she kept pace with the ascending hill of ice. It burst through the surface of the sea like a cork bobbing up from the depths, sending roaring waves outward as it plunged back downwards. Ami tumbled uncontrollably in the turbulences, spinning around in the frothing waters until she managed to teleport to a safer distance. It took some time for the bobbing motions of the enormous mass to subside, and Ami dearly hoped that nobody on the shore was noticing the commotion. Finally, the miniature iceberg was drifting still in the water, the tip of its cone pointing downward like a huge icicle. Only a shallow plateau of ice protruded above the surface.

Ami moved herself on top of the swimming platform, happy that she could stop treading water. With a few quick movements of her arms, she summoned her signature fog spell, and the banks of mist rolled outwards, hiding the drifting patch of ice from prying eyes. The hardest part was over now, Ami felt. On her behest, an imp appeared and started digging its way down into the heart of the iceberg, towards the entombed dungeon heart. The young Keeper followed the creature inside, making sure not to slip on the wet ice, like the greenish brown minion before her just had. It was rolling down the spiralling staircase it had just hewn, and Ami deftly caught her servant before it could bash its skull in on one of the sharp edges. Another quick Shabon Spray Freezing sealed the passage behind her, and then she continued her descent until she reached the dungeon heart itself, resting in a bubble-like grotto deep within the ice.

There was a flash of black lightning, and for a moment, a tar-like pillar stood in front of the icy simulacrum before the darkness resolved itself into Ami's real body, and colour slowly returned to her

form. Immediately, she felt the touch of cold air on her cheeks, its frosty embrace seeping through the fabric of her clothes. It was a discomfort she hadn't had to deal with as an ice golem. Unfortunately, this step of the procedure required her physical presence, and so she knelt down in front of the rune-covered circular stone plate, looking down at it through a cloud of her condensing breath. Wincing at the pain, she rubbed the knuckles of her left hand over the surface with a quick and jerky motion, then smeared the emerging droplets of blood onto the cover. Seeing that the circle of sigils carved around the edge of the inactive heart flared with green light, she hurriedly retreated into the narrow passage that led into the chamber. Not a moment too soon, as the plate was blasted into the air violently, striking the ceiling and bursting into a number of shards that went flying through the chamber. As if melting in reverse, the three slender pillars that formed an active dungeon heart's superstructure grew from the floor, blossoming out into interconnected arches at their tops that were decorated with statues of snake-like eastern dragons wrapping their meandering bodies around them. A deep, rumbling heartbeat started up from below, mixing with the constant sound of waves crashing against the drifting ice.

Ami dared to poke her head around the bend when the danger seemed over, and was momentarily dazzled by the interplay of green light and reflective ice surfaces. The pillar of greenish mana swirling above the dungeon heart's pit shone brightly, banishing all shadows from this room. It was beautiful despite its origin, Ami found, as if the entire place was carved from emerald. She could barely imagine what it would look like once her imps smoothed the walls properly. Realising that she was gaping, she closed her mouth and concentrated on the important matter of getting this swimming dungeon out of local waters. A brief moment of concentration was all that was required to transfer the remaining gold from the now unclaimed treasury of the conquered dungeon to her location. It rattled to the ground and formed a nice, gleaming pile at her feet. There wasn't much, but it would suffice for her purposes. All that remained to do was making the vessel more streamlined by adding ice in some places and removing it in others, and, of course, adding propulsion. Sails were out of the question. For one, she had never gone sailing and did not know how to use them, and for the other,

she did not want to be dependent on the vagaries of the wind. Besides, sails were visible from a long distance, and the dungeon heart was putting out sufficient power for a much better alternative: the marine screw propeller. While she didn't know any spell that would allow her to spin the devices directly, magic could be converted into electricity quite easily and independently of her own presence, as the lightning traps within Malleus' dungeon demonstrated. She also had enough wire and metal parts to construct several coils and primitive electric motors, which would work well enough until she got around to developing magical means of propulsion. This would free up her golems to guard the place and man the rudder, and she would be free to do other things while waiting for the ship to arrive at its destination. She looked down at the map on the screen of her palmtop, where her current position was a red 'x' right off the west coast of the largest continent. Her destination, the Avatar Isles, were all the way off the east coast though, so the journey would take - a few keystrokes summoned a dotted line around the southern edge of the continent, indicating the shortest possible route - around two to three weeks. Well, it looked as if she had some free time on her hands.

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Out-of-Dungeon Experiences

Originally on 2009-12-27T02:22:00

Ami could travel between her active dungeon hearts as easily as stepping into one end of a tunnel and walking out the other, so the blue-haired girl appeared back in her main base only moments after putting the finishing touches on her ice ship. As she hovered in the updraft of green mana flowing up from the beating membrane in the pit below and slowly drifted toward solid ground, she hoped that the golem crew she had left in charge of the vessel would be able to do its job. In particular, she was worried about whether they could handle the singular pumpkin-sized eyeball on a stalk that served as improvised communication device. The disturbingly undulating orb wasn't delicate, but it *was* an eye, and the animated statues had fingers made of ice, so there was a very real danger that they could get stuck to freezing tear liquid, not unlike the way tongues could get stuck to cold metal poles. Oh well, she would deal with that problem if it actually happened. Ami looked down, as if she could see the command centre through the multiple layers of rock and stone. She was able to, of course, but only with her Keeper powers, not her eyes. It was just an unconscious gesture while she pondered what she should tell her employees when she moved herself over there. Congratulations on the successful mission were in order, of course.

Without tarrying any longer, she teleported to her destination, where her sudden arrival caused a burst of hurried activity as bored-looking warlocks jumped to their feet and attempted to look busy. Ami pretended not to see one of the evil wizards tug at his beard, which was stuck in the cable tangle powering the crystal balls. The left cheek of another displayed a pattern that matched the grain of the wood of the desk he had been using as a pillow. The short-haired girl scratched her head. Maybe she should have dismissed everyone when the main fighting was over? Over in the elevated command chair, Cathy stretched, but at least she looked unabashed about having relaxed for a while. Ami waited for the shuffling and adjusting of chairs to subside, glancing over at the huge aquarium that served as a map. Its contents had changed from the 3D map of

the now destroyed enemy dungeon to a world map, and one of the green liquid golems within the tank now marked the current location of her new dungeon-ship with an 'X' on the blue background of the ocean.

Ami took position on the dais in front of the blonde adventuress's semi-circular desk, aware that all eyes in the room were now tracking her. Her confidence bolstered by the recent victory, she smiled as she spoke. "At ease. Good work, everyone. I am very satisfied with your performance and the results of this operation, and consider the test of the new equipment a full success. Please feel free to go get some well-deserved rest now." Some reluctant cheers answered her proclamation, and the short-haired girl turned to Cathy when the other minions started to file out of the vast chamber. "I really meant that," Ami smiled at the older woman, "you did very well. With you here coordinating the other golem teams and providing warning, this fight went really smoothly. You too, Jadeite - " the senshi let her gaze sweep over the now abandoned rows of crystal balls and mysterious eye-stalks "- Jadeite? Is he around?"

"He mumbled something about being bored and going to bed," Jered answered the question from where he was sitting in front of the scribe-imp, who was still holding a slate and chalk.

Ami concentrated briefly on the quarters she had assigned to the dark general. The picture that formed in her Keeper vision was that of a spacious bedroom, with a grey uniform draped over a convenient chair, and the man in question peacefully asleep in his bed. Ami could make out a bare arm and a shoulder not covered by the charcoal-coloured blankets, and realised that she was invading his privacy. Her cheeks turned pinker than usual, and her eyes lost their faraway expression when she re-focused on the people in the room. "Oh. All that teleporting must have tired him out. Say, Cathy, were there any technical problems during the operation?"

"Well, the pictures on the big screens were somewhat distorted, and three of Snyder's mana storage batteries went flat faster than expected, but on the whole, everything worked as intended."

"That's good to hear," Ami nodded, then stifled a yawn. "Very well. Seeing how we are all tired, I suggest we turn in for the night and

have a proper debriefing tomorrow." There were no objections from the adventurers looking at her with dark-rimmed eyes.

The discussion of the previous day's conquest of a rival Keeper had been brief and had not brought to light anything more important than a few stream-lining suggestions for command centre procedure. The five people involved in the meeting were still sitting around the round table, helping themselves to the bread and slices of roast chicken resting on plates amidst the notes and maps strewn about the table. Ami discretely glanced at Jadeite, who was sitting opposite from her at the table. The former dark general's face showed a bemused expression as he tried to imitate the others' behaviour without giving the impression that he did. She couldn't tell whether it was the informality of the meeting, the fact that he had been included, that he was having breakfast with a sailor senshi and some humans, or the food itself that had him feeling most out of his depth. At first, the blue-haired girl had felt some reluctance about adding him to her circle of closest advisers, which were the three adventurers who were digging into the food with gusto, but he was just too useful to exclude, especially as she did not know the full width of his abilities.

"So then, Mercury. Have you made any plans for what do to while waiting for the ship to arrive?" Snyder asked during a pause in the idle chatter, when everyone else was chewing.

Ami put down her sandwich, and nodded. "Of course. There are several important issues that need to be addressed, the most threatening of which is the dark god Azzathra's challenge."

"Hmm?" Jadeite raised an eyebrow questioningly, feeling the urge to participate in the chitchat for the first time.

"She must best a horned reaper in close combat before a certain date in a couple of months, or he'll unleash another magical plague on us," Jered explained.

The curly-haired blond's stared blankly. "Horned reaper?"

"A kind of demon. Very strong, tough, fast, armed with a scythe,

most lethal in melee, but can also channel fire magic through his weapon. As you can see, there's clearly no reason to be worried," Cathy quipped drily, then took a long sip from her tankard of water.

"Mercury has beaten him before, but never easily, and never by staying close enough for him to actually reach her. I can show him to you later, he is currently locked up in the dungeon," the brown-haired man sitting next to the swordswoman offered.

Jadeite nodded, half-closing his eyes in thought.

"In any case, it seems prudent to get Mercury into better shape. Don't think I have forgotten your abysmal performance doing our earlier sparring sessions. I already have plans for a training regimen." Cathy turned to Ami, teeth gleaming white in her wide smile, and blue eyes sparkling with amusement that promised painful things to come.

Predictably, the girl in question raised both of her hands, palms facing outward, and leaned away. "Thanks, but I think we had better find out the rules governing this battle first. I don't intend to fight it if at all possible. The dark gods could just keep yanking my chain in the future, so I'd much rather find a way to stop them from messing with me. Jered," she turned to the weasel-featured man, "could you please go to the Underworld and find me a priest of the dark gods, or at least someone who knows how to build a temple dedicated to them?"

"What!? Why would you want to build something like that? That one deal you had with them was bad enough!" Cathy stood up abruptly, slamming her hands down on the wood of the table to steady herself while leaning forward. Ami's eyes widened at the sudden explosion, and she cringed.

"It's not hat I want to deal with them!" Ami blurted out, "I need to research them, but Azzathra wrecked the existing temple. Malleus only studied how to build one dedicated to the dead Devourer, and that's not going to help! If I want to defeat them, I need to know the enemy! And a temple is the only access point I know of," she continued, watching with some relief that Cathy's ire was abating as fast as it had been ignited. She didn't notice Jadeite narrow his eyes

as he followed the exchange. "In addition, it could be a way home. Jadeite came from one, so it stands to reason that it could be used as a gate to the Dark Kingdom in the right circumstances."

"Just- just be careful, all right? They are the dark gods, and I don't believe anything good can come from this," the scar-faced blonde conceded, sitting back down.

"Well, I am inclined to agree," Snyder added his take on the situation. "On the other hand, the creatures here in the dungeon will appreciate having a place of worship, and it might keep down dissent in the ranks."

"That's a good point, thank you Snyder," Ami agreed with the red-and-white robed acolyte. "Oh, and could you continue working on a better anti-transformation ward for the dungeon heart, please? I would really like to be able to use my transformation freely again." At the young man's nod, she turned back to Jered. "All right then. You can go to the Underworld and take whoever you want as bodyguards, while I - "

"Actually, I want you to accompany me," the wavy-haired man interrupted. "You have neglected dealing with your other underlings so far, but there is some grumbling and other issues that you need to address. In short, you will need to hold court, and you will need a suitable wardrobe. *That* just won't do."

Ami looked down at the ensemble of blue trousers and long-sleeved shirt she had conjured. They looked perfectly workable to her, even if her inexperience showed in both design and execution. "I don't see why I should have to impress my own employees. Isn't it enough that I have demonstrated my power?"

"That's not it. Evil creatures are not that picky. They will follow an eccentric Keeper. They will even follow a personally weak Keeper," Jered said while cleaning his individual fingers with a napkin, "but they won't follow an impoverished Keeper. And your obviously self-made outfit doesn't exactly give the appearance of wealth."

"I concur that it is embarrassing to serve under someone dressed so shabbily," Jadeite said with a smirk.

"I, well..." Ami hesitated. There were so many other things she had to, but her companions seemed quite insistent. She wasn't that bad a dresser, right? Her mother had always approved of her choices.

"Besides, you can go safely in a golem body. They have exactly the same measurements you do, so it shouldn't be a problem. It would do you a world of good to just relax for a bit and have some fun shopping, like a normal girl your age. All that worrying can't be good for you."

Ami nodded once, yielding to the pressure. "All right. I will come along. Maybe I can even learn some things while I'm there, or find some more books on magic. Yes, the more I think about it, the more I like it," she pondered, getting more enthusiastic about the plan.

The dungeon's portal had lain in ruins since Keeper Malleus had destroyed it when Ami invaded his domain, effectively keeping his creatures from deserting. The four massive monoliths that had once stood at the corners of the mystical site lay strewn across the chamber, dwarfing Ami even in their shattered and horizontal state. Magic flowed through her as the dungeon heart yielded to her will and mixed mana and gold to affect changes on the broken remnants. Before her eyes, cracks and breaks in the fallen pillars mended, glowing faintly from within before sealing over. This was the easy part, the one she could have done at any time. Ami took a few steps back to avoid the cloud of stirred-up dust spiralling around the construction site. Getting the pieces that were currently piled atop each other like fallen dominos back into position was the time-consuming part that had made her put off the task in favour of more pressing ones. Each of the magically charged menhirs had to weigh nearly as much as a dungeon heart, and without them, the portal location was useless.

"Keeper, I can oversee the construction of the scaffolding, as I am quite experienced with architectural projects, and it would please me to use my skills on your behalf," an overeager warlock stepped out of the shadows, the peaks of his collar jutting outward like horns as he approached Ami's group. His long purple robe reached to the floor and gave the impression that the short-bearded man was

gliding forward.

"That won't be necessary, but it was a nice try at currying favour," a male voice interrupted before Ami could reply to the dark magician, whose appearance reminded her uncomfortably of the torturer from Arachne's dungeon. Jadeite pushed his way through the crowd of waiting orcs, shoving the armoured, pinkish-red creatures out of his way with apparent ease, despite them being of a far more muscular build.

"Get lost newbie," the offended warlock snarled, eyes flashing. "Just because you damn vampires are marginally useful due to your teleporting ability doesn't mean I'll just let you get in my way!" a sizeable fireball was forming at the top of his staff, crackling in the cool air.

"Vampire?" the dark general chuckled in amusement, his arrogant smirk widening. He found himself in a suddenly widening circle as the orcs hastily got out of the expected blast radius. "Am I supposed to be impressed by that little firecracker? Observe!" Jadeite thrust a white-gloved hand outward, toward the pile of fallen monoliths. With a loud rumble, the topmost of the toppled standing stones shifted, quivering for a moment before it slowly swung into upright position and slid to its former position, where it landed with a thud that shook the ground. The curly-haired blonde enjoyed his opponent's eyes bugging out at the sight. "How is that for scaffolding?" The bright orange light from the fireball faded out as the intimidated warlock beat a hasty retreat. "And let that be a lesson to all who would challenge a dark general!" he gloated. The looks he was getting from the grey-haired orcs were a lot more respectful than before.

"Very good, oh great and mighty 'general', but there are three more pillars that need moving," Cathy interrupted his ego stroking, casually pointing over her shoulder with a thumb at the remaining menhirs.

"Very well, 'commander'," Jadeite replied after a sidewards glance at Ami, who was frowning at everyone's childish behaviour. His voice indicated that his use of Cathy's title was meant exactly as sincerely as hers of his.

With the grey-uniformed man's telekinetic powers replacing the time-consuming work of pulleys as well as large teams of workers, the portal was back in working condition in a matter of minutes, rather than days. Ami found that the dark general was quickly making himself indispensable, and feared that this was exactly what he was planning. Well, 'fear' was a bit too strong of a word, but it would put her in a weaker position if he started to make demands of his own. Except for the imps, she couldn't force any of her employees to obey her orders. They couldn't harm her, but they were under no compulsion to follow her every command, and their obedience stemmed from the fact that, as the Keeper, she could do whatever she wished to them. And from the generous wages she paid them, as Jered had pointed out earlier. She shouldn't forget that Jadeite was potentially as dangerous and uncontrollable a minion as the Reaper, but at least he seemed less headstrong. She wondered what it would take to secure his loyalty, and if it was possible at all.

Putting the issue of her most powerful underling aside for the moment, Ami stepped up to the portal and placed her hand on one of the softly-humming monoliths. The rough stone felt warm to the touch, and Ami could feel the space-warping potential sleeping just beneath the rock, waiting for a mind to prod it into activity. The portals, she now knew, could only be constructed in very specific locations, and had two basic settings. On the first, it would act as a beacon, allowing creatures at other portals within the Underworld to enter her dungeon and seek employment. The second, which she was intending to use, would create a two-way connection with another portal of her choice. The selection of possible candidates was swirling through her mind, with little to indicate their distance or relative location. Images of the portals' surroundings flickered through her mindscape like fleeting visions, showing her in quick succession pictures of grandiose lava-filled caves, dark abysses, strange fungus-filled caverns, and curious mixes of the former. One of the options she identified as the Underworld city she had already visited. She rejected that one almost as soon as she recognised it. It had been rather provincial, all things considered, and there was no need to expose her new minions to the nasty rumours about herself. Realising that she didn't know enough about the possible destinations to make a well-informed choice, she focused on one that had a large settlement, a low amount of fire, and a large

proportion of human or near-human denizens. She had seen the trolls' and orcs' ideas of clothes, and they were very minimalist.

As soon as she had made the decision, the air between the monoliths started to stir and flicker, as if under great heat, and an amber-tinted panorama of the alien landscape beyond appeared. With a satisfied nod, Ami faced a waiting golem and turned into a light-devouring shadow that filled the animated statue, one of the empowered survivors of her recent raid. Her colourless eyes filled with a reddish glow as she started moving, turning toward her travelling companions with the grinding of moving ice. "Okay, the portal is ready. Did we forget anything?"

The retinue of six burly orcs remained silent or shrugged their shoulders. The large-nosed brutes looked very similar in build and facial structure to their smaller trollish cousins, but the big difference in skin colour, and the fact that the orcs grew hair on their scalps effectively prevented mix-ups. As a whole, the pinkish-red beings were more war-like and disciplined than most of Ami's other servants, as the clean polish of their breastplates and spiked maces attested to. In her opinion, they were the closest to professional soldiers that she had, and so it made sense to select the best of them as bodyguards for Jered during this expedition into the unknown. The brown-haired, lanky man shook his head in the negative, having nothing to add.

"Why aren't you using a glamour to go out there? It would make colour-coordinating your new outfit easier if you weren't completely transparent." Jadeite asked unexpectedly.

"A glamour?" Ami wasn't quite sure what the dark general meant.

"Yes. You know, what Sailor Moon or the youmas use when they disguise themselves?"

"Oh. I don't have that power," Ami admitted. He did have a good point, though. When she got home, she would have to ask Usagi to lend her the disguise pen so she could hide her glowing eyes and fit into normal society.

"Is that so? May I cast the spell for you, then?" Jadeite offered

smoothly, looking rather smug.

Ami considered this briefly, then brought her visor into existence and nodded. It couldn't hurt, and if she could learn something from it, all the better. The dark general briefly tapped her on her frozen shoulder, and she felt a tingling sensation while specks of purplish power wrapped around her, and then retreated. She looked at her hands, and saw natural skin tones. With some surprise, she could now feel how scratchy the fabric of the golem's short, linen shirt and trousers was. She was lucky that she had taken to equipping all of her active golems with conjured clothing after some melting-related incidents. Chilly ice armour would have been greatly uncomfortable, not to mention embarrassing, like this. "This isn't just an illusion?" she asked, looking up at Jadeite while poking at the palm of her left hand with a finger and encountering yielding flesh, rather than the expected hardness of ice.

"It is a very advanced form of illusion," the dark general corrected, "how do you think my disguised youmas would be able to interact with the world in an unsuspicious way if all I did was put a false image over them?"

"I thought they just shifted shape," Ami replied. "Thanks for the assistance, though. See you all later!" With that, she stepped up to the portal, her form fading away more with each step she took toward its centre. Jered followed behind her, flanked on both sides by a trio of orcs that looked as if they meant business.

The two blondes remaining in the room after the procession had disappeared looked at each other. The long-haired one was the first to speak. With an amused smile playing around her lips, Cathy raised an eyebrow. "Colour-coordination? Your Dark Kingdom is certainly teaching interesting things to its generals."

Unlike Ami's first trip through a portal, the atmosphere that greeted her was not one of oppressive heat. The air was still warm, but like a pleasant summer day, rather than a desert at noon. Instead, what struck her was the sheer size of the cavern she found herself in. The domed arc of the ceiling had to be at least a kilometre above her

head, and rose even higher toward the centre of the roughly circular grotto, until it came to an apex at nearly three kilometres. Below the tooth-like stalactites hanging from the dome stood a mind-bogglingly huge mushroom, whose flat hat nearly touched the lowest-hanging of the dripping stones. The deep valleys between its lamellas flared with the blue bioluminescence of its spores, which also coated most surfaces within the cavern like lichen. As a result, the entire region was glowing faintly, its earthen and grey tones shifted toward blue and green, as if the entire area was underwater.

"Eww. It stinks," Jered commented immediately after stumbling out of the active portal. "Whoa, that's one big mushroom. Looks poisonous?"

"It's edible, but not to human tastes,"Ami muttered after a glance at the readouts of her visor. Zooming in closer on the brownish growth, she managed to distinguished people climbing across its stem, walking on platforms spiralling around the entire circumference of the fungus. The citizens seemed to be harvesting the liquid seeping from pores in its surface.

"I'll take your word for it," the wavy-haired man replied, already turning his attention toward the bottom of the mushroom's stem, around which the centre of the local city huddled. On closer inspection, it seemed that the local dwelling was more of a network of several villages all clustered within a wall formed by miniature version of the large growth. Ami had half expected the buildings beyond the palisade to also follow a mushroom theme, but they were quite sensibly constructed from rock, rather than wet, slimy fungus flesh. Jered sneezed when a few of the luminescent spores drifted over to their location. "Oh, great. At least this time, there's no welcoming committee around."

"They don't need to," the largest of the orcs grunted, "they got the whole waylaying business institutionalised." His crooked index finger pointed down the path toward the single large gate leading into the city, or, more precisely, at the toll booth at its left. "Bloody dark elves."

Ami found that 'dark elf' was a bit of a misnomer for the creatures who populated the city. While they were lithe and had pointy ears,

their skin was snow-white and they were completely bald. They also seemed to have exchanged the traditional elven weapon of bow and arrows for crossbows. "It's their city, they can do what they want," she said.

"Of course, Keeper." the orc grumbled, falling into lock-step with his companions as they marched toward the dwelling, while the sentries on watch towers positioned around the palisades kept their crossbows trailed on them.

"Stop! The entrance fee is ten gold per person. What's the purpose of your visit?" a bored-sounding elf asked condescendingly from within the guardhouse. She was female, a fact that was not hidden by the skimpy leather breastplate she was wearing. How could she even breathe in that thing, Ami wondered briefly, lifting her gaze to the woman's eyes quickly. They were red, but the natural crimson of albinism, not the hellfire glow of a dark magic user.

Jered's eyebrow twitched. "Ten gold just for getting in? That's an outrage! Just what-"

"Per person. You can pay, you can leave, or you can try to enter without paying. Go ahead, I could use the entertainment!" the elf's lips split into a grin, displaying the teeth of a carnivore.

"We will pay," Ami interrupted before Jered could bog them down further by attempting to haggle.

"Smart. Boring but smart." the woman looked Ami up and down, scrunching her nose at the sight. "So you are in command of this bunch? Who thought that was a good idea?"

A mace smashed down on the board right next to her hand, cracking the ancient wood and sending splinters flying. "You will address Keeper Mercury with respect, worm!" the lead orc bellowed, glowering down at the dark elf, whose eyebrows narrowed as she glared right back. "Back off, you filthy piece of dung, unless you like to end up as a pincushion. She gestured toward the street, where several soldiers holding crossbows had appeared on elevated platforms. With a growl, the orc ripped his mace out of the wood, some of which stuck to the barbed spikes lining the weapon.

"So you are Keeper Mercury," the elf woman turned her attention back on Ami, seemingly unperturbed. "the one who offed Malleus, some schmuck on the west coast, and played a pivotal role in the defeat of Keeper Arachne. Rumoured to have done all that without a dungeon heart in the vicinity. You are making some people very worried, my dear," she grinned like a shark, "but I must say your choice in bodies to possess is abysmal. And those glasses! Couldn't you have found something less scrawny and more developed among your minions? Or is that another of your kinky games?"

Ami blushed and nearly throw the entry fee on the dented counter. "None of your business! Now let us through already!"

"Whatever." The elf brushed the gold coins into a drawer in front of her. "The rules are simple. Leave the visitor area, you die. Make a nuisance out of yourself, you die. I bet you can figure out what the penalty for stealing is by yourself."

"How rude." Ami stomped away, leaving the haughty woman behind.

Jered suppressed a chuckle. "Rude but well-informed. You'll never live those rumours about you and the Reaper down, it seems."

One of the orc bodyguards grumbled. "Arrogant pointy-ears. We should return in force and put them into their place!"

"Let's focus on doing what we came here for," Ami headed off further bloodthirsty comments. She was looking at the area with wide eyes, less interested in the unremarkable architecture than in the readouts of her visor. In particular, she was watching the invisible links that connected her minions to the dungeon heart. It was logical to assume that they would shoot off toward the portal, but they did nothing of the sort. Instead, they were angling upward and to the left, curving slightly. A simple triangulation came up with the result that her dungeon heart should be located around seventy metres above the ground and half a kilometre to the east, which made no sense at all. Something weird was going on with space here, and if she wanted to find out where this place was in relation to her dungeon, she would need to run more analyses on her computer. She stopped, swivelling her head left and right as she surveyed the market area. A few trolls and giant lizards were moving

about, clearly visitors to the area too. And they had arcane connections to another dungeon heart, Ami realised with a start. Despite the glamour, she did not have a heart that could beat faster, but she thought she could hear the water inside her gurgle with excitement when it occurred to her that, once she had figured out exactly how the Underworld/normal world transition twisted space, she could use this knowledge to localise enemy dungeon hearts just by observing minions! That could be an invaluable tactical advantage!

"Mercury? What are you staring at?" Jered asked, following her gaze to a particular troll, who noticed their scrutiny and flipped them the bird.

"I'll tell you later, when we are away from prying ears. Have you found a tailor yet?"

"There's an upscale one over there, at the corner," the weasel-featured man pointed out. The establishment was decorated with engraved spider webs praising the quality of the silk used in its products. He thanked the Light that the market did not seem to have slave trading stands, as he could vividly imagine Mercury's reaction to seeing some of those. He rather liked his skin unpierced by poisoned bolts, thank you very much. Instead, it was an exchange point for rare valuables and ores, exotic scrolls, looted weapons, and the likes. "I don't think you'll want me around when trying on some clothes, so I'll go explore some more on my own if that's fine with you," he said.

"Okay. I can find you when I'm done," Ami answered, already walking toward the shop. "Stay with Jered," she ordered the orc soldiers, "I can defend myself."

Once the creaking door closed behind her, Ami was surprised at how little resemblance the clothing store bore to the ones at home. There were no shelves with clothes just waiting to be tried on, only several samples of the tailor's skill on display along the walls. The severe-looking dark elf himself sat behind the counter, giving her a measuring stare and scoffed at her outfit. "I can see that you are in dire need of my services, but you don't look like you'd be able to afford my prices."

"A good morning to you too," Ami replied, taken aback by his abrasiveness. A handful of coins appeared in her hand, jingling enticingly. "I am Keeper Mercury, and I assure you that my current appearance is completely unrelated to my ability to pay." Forcing a confidence into her voice that did not come natural to her, she avoided eye contact by pretending to be interested in the samples of his craft. She had a sinking feeling when she took in the details. Most of the garments could be described with adjectives such as 'slinky', 'tight-fitting', and 'scanty'.

"Of course, Keeper. Forgive me for not recognising you at once from the descriptions." Now all business, the tailor unfolded his surprisingly tall form as he stood up and walked out from behind his counter, with measuring bands draped across his arms.

Ami observed that the man's own wardrobe was decorated with very fine stitches. The little of which there was, anyway. What was it was it with Underworlders and leather? Colouring slightly, she turned her gaze away from his maggoty-pale pectorals, and decided that a tailor would be just the person to have an answer to that question. "Excuse me, but I'm not originally from the Underworld, so how comes that nearly everything in here is leather?"

The albino seemed taken aback for a moment, then smiled, revealing at least four gold teeth. "The simple answer is that people like the style. The complicated answer is 'fucking warlocks'. You know how them frockwearers are always finding new ways to use magic to make people's lives miserable? Yeah, one of those wiseguys a few hundred years back got the bright idea that, hey, there had to be a way to see through fabric to the skin below. There was. 'Nuff said."

"Oh. OH!" Ami's blush deepened, and she hid the bottom of her face with both hands, to the secret amusement of the tailor. Leather was nothing but processed skin, after all.

"Shall we get to work, then? Please follow me to the back room and stand on the round pedestal."

The blue-haired girl walked onto the indicated platform, which was surrounded by full-length mirrors on three sides.

"Good. Now please take a seat." He indicated one of the comfortable-looking plush chairs arranged around the sides of the back room. Confused, Ami followed his instruction, and then noted that she was leaving a ghost-like effigy behind. "Very good. Now, why don't I demonstrate some of my more popular outfits on the mannequin, and you tell me what you want changed?"

"That sounds good," Ami nodded, "please proceed."

The dark elf intoned a spell, and the mannequin flickered and was suddenly dressed in one of the garments that she had seen outside, rather than the clothes she was currently wearing. Ami was suddenly glad that Jered had chosen not to accompany her inside. The garment did look nice on her body, and the golden inlays were a feast for the eyes, certainly, but she was pretty sure that the tailor had exaggerated her attributes in order to flatter her. In addition, she would only consider an outfit like that as beachwear. If it wasn't made from leather. Or black.

"I was looking for something with more fabric," she protested, blush returning in full force.

"A cape would go well with it," the man suggested.

"Not what I had in mind," Ami said quickly. To be fair, he *probably* wasn't trying to tease her. After all, he was wearing even less than her image. "I was thinking of something that more projected the image of a ruler. And that covered the arms and legs."

"Oh, why didn't you say so! I have just the thing!" A magical gesture, and the outfit changed.

Ami stared. "How am I supposed to move in that without pricking myself on the spikes?"

"Don't like it? How about this?"

"It's made of belts!"

"That's a no? What about this one?"

Ami coughed at the sight. "NO! Topless is completely out of the

question! Isn't there something with full-body coverage?"

"Well, this one is very popular among dark mistress-"

"NO! Nothing with masks either," she added.

"You are hard to please," the tailor sighed. "All right. Why don't you describe more in detail what you want?"

Ami took a deep breath, trying to calm herself down before she had a stroke from acute embarrassment. "I was thinking something more along the lines of what surface nobility would be wearing."

The dark elf hummed disapprovingly. "Well, if you insist. How about this?"

Ami leaned forward. This was much better. A long, flowing dress with a decent neckline and a wasp-like waist. "Oh, now we are getting closer! I could use that one, if it wasn't black, but it is a bit impractical to wear all the time. Do you have a model with pants?"

"Pants? With a dress? I may not be up to the latest sodding surfacer's trends, but I'm sure that would look off."

"Not with a dress. With a blouse or jacket." Ami was starting to feel exasperated. "Kind of what I'm wearing now."

"But that's boys'- oh, I see!" the tailor tapped his forehead with the palm of his hand in sudden understanding, and a smile that showed off his pointed teeth appeared face. "You want to look like a prince, not a princess! I should have realised immediately, what with the short hair and the stories abou-"

"Just get to it!" Ami hung her head, silently gritting her teeth.

"Fine, fine," the tailor waved his fingers again, this time producing an outfit that was much more to the young girls' tastes. "You realise that the dark gods will frown upon you flaunting the dress code like that, right?"

Ami's head snapped upward "They what? They have a *dress code*?"

"Allegedly. It is common knowledge that servants of darkness who ignore the traditional attires in favour of less exciting garments suffer from frequent wardrobe malfunctions."

"You are kidding me." Ami massaged the bridge of her nose, feeling a headache coming. In light of her experiences, it made a distressing amount of sense. "Very well. Please let's finish adjusting this costume more to my tastes. I will have another look at your more," she sighed, "traditional dresses later."

"As you wish, Keeper. Will you also require matching undergarments?"

When a thoroughly mortified Ami left the shop two hours later with her purchases, the much enriched dark elf shook his head. Stupid humans. So gullible.

Clanking of chains and inarticulate roars echoed through the darkened hallways long before the two blonde figures reached the cell in the farthest recesses of Ami's dungeon.

"So that is a horned reaper," Jadeite said, staring through the bars at the hulking red figure chained spread-eagled to the wall. The arm-thick links of the restrains were taut enough that the heavy demon hung suspended, not touching the ground with his bulky hooves. "I must confess, I didn't think little goody-two-shoes Mercury would resort to keep an enemy locked up as uncomfortably as that."

"You don't know their mutual history," Cathy said. "Besides, it's pretty much the only way to keep the beast stashed away safely, and even then, his presence makes me uncomfortable." Her eyes wandered to the holes in the wall into which the Reaper's chains disappeared. Whenever his bulging muscles tightened for another jerk at his restraints, some fine-ground stone dust trickled out of the openings.

"I will kill her! I will destroy her! And all of you little worms serving her too!" the reaper howled, yellow eyes flashing in rage.

"Will you now?" Jadeite stepped closer to the bars, looking at the tied-up monster contemptuously. "You don't look so tough."

"Why don't you let me loose and say that again, girly-boy? Are you afraid I'm going to rip those earrings right out of their sockets and feed them to you?"

The dark general cocked his head and rested his chin on the fingers of his right hand, as if actually considering the idea.

"Jadeite! Don't do anything stupid!" Cathy shouted, "If the Reaper doesn't kill you, Mercury will!"

"Don't worry, 'commander'," he said as he turned away from the horned monster and faced her. "I'm not so easily goaded by petty insults. Though I wonder what Sailor Mercury did to get him so annoyed at her." He started walking away from the cell, and the sailor-suited woman quickly fell in step next to him.

"Well, let's see," the longer-haired blonde said, "She somehow forced him to serve her for a while. She also got him into that pretty outfit I'm wearing now." That prompted an amused snort from Jadeite and a roar of fury from the horned reaper, becoming more distant as they moved on. "She somehow exchanged bodies with him, and then involuntarily destroyed his reputation by making it appear as if she was doing unspeakable things to him. Then she beat him publicly twice. And threatened to transfer him permanently into a chicken body. Add to that that murderous rage is his base state of existence, and..." she waved her hands, encouraging Jadeite to draw his own conclusions.

"Indeed." The exiled dark general looked thoughtful. "And she will have to face him again, in melee combat no less? I could handle him, naturally, but I can see how it would be a problem for a weak girl like her."

"It is the problem we have to solve," Cathy sighed, inclining her head. "It's depressing, really. If I hadn't seen Baron Leopold do just that, I would have thought it impossible for a human to beat a reaper in a stand-up fight."

"Baron Leopold, you say? Tell me more about how he did it."

Ami descended the three flat steps out of the tailor's shop, stepping back into the spore-lit glow of the sparsely-frequented market place. She fidgeted with the collar of her new blouse - only the finest spider silk for a Keeper like her - and felt very self-conscious in her new ensemble. Not that it was revealing more skin than she was comfortable with, but she looked overdressed for the occasion. The tailor had started with a blouse, to be tucked into the high-waisted trousers, and a short-sleeved jacket of military cut that was long enough to be worn as a minidress on its own, should Ami be feeling adventurous. Working from that simple basis, he had started to make it more befitting of nobility. Ami had firmly vetoed the cape, but let him talk her into accepting the gold-fringed epaulettes on the shoulders. She had no objection to the addition of abstract designs in choice locations, again in gold, but had refused to budge on the issue of strategically-placed sheer sections, much to the tall albino's frustration. In a nod to tradition, the outfit was predominantly black, even though the blue-haired girl would have preferred aquamarine. At least the Mercury symbols on the epaulettes were still in that colour, and some of the less modest outfits she had bought had more cheerful tones, too. Now, should she take up the tailor's suggestion and look for a jeweller to round out her wardr- she felt a hard, piercing sensation at the back of her neck and stumbled forward.

The hooded figure had clung to the façade of the building that Ami had just left, its cloak blending in perfectly with the spore and lichen-covered masonry. It had dropped down behind the girl, who was oblivious to its presence up until it used the momentum of its descent to thrust the long stiletto in its hands straight through its target's spine at the base of the skull. The weapon went in to the haft with a sharp grinding noise, and the assassin grinned in satisfaction behind his mask. So much for Keeper Mercury. What a twit, not even defence spells - not that they would have stopped his enchanted blade. His master would reward him well for removing that potential problem.

"Ow! What the...?" his victim protested, stumbling forward instead of

having the good sense of collapsing like a puppet with its strings cut. The assassin's eyes bugged out when Mercury whirled around to get a look at her assailant. However, he was a trained professional and immediately brought up his backup weapon. The startled girl's pupil's became little pinpricks when he thrust at her with his rapier, but she moved fiendishly fast and was already dodging out of the way. Just as planned. With a quick twist of his wrist, he exploited her falling for his feint and corrected the course of the weapon. There was a brief, unexpected resistance when its point broke her skin - he must have hit a rib - but then it went in, easily spearing the heart. Then the weapon was wrenched violently out of his grasp when the well-dressed girl twisted around and shifted her weight to lash out with a kick, quick as a snake. That was completely unfair, the hired murderer thought, gasping for breath despite the leather armour that had protected his stomach. Even vampires died when you stabbed them through the heart! As he staggered backward, he could hear the monster mutter in a tone of disbelief "...and I just bought this," while staring at the blade embedded in her chest. At that moment, he felt the familiar yank of transportation magic rip him through space and back to his Keeper, presumably to report on his failure. He shuddered.

Ami blinked at the empty spot that had only a moment before contained her attacker. An assassination attempt? On her? That was worrisome. Who could have sent him? Were there more? She summoned her visor and turned in a circle to survey the area, letting her gaze wander over the various groups of dark elves and other market visitors, who were all staring at her with round eyes. What were they- oh, right. She still had a long, slender blade stuck through her torso. It hurt a bit, but not more than a regular cut, as Jadeite's glamour was barely skin deep. There was very little blood, and the ice of the golem body was already re-freezing around the damage. Ami gripped the handle of the weapon and pulled hard. With a faint grinding noise, the weapon slid out of its position, revealing gleaming steel centimetre by centimetre. With a final wet squelch, the blade came free, and she held it in her hand, pondering what to do with it. Maybe she could keep it around and find out who had tried to take her life? She tried hard not to think about how she would be dead now if she had been in her real body. Once again, this event had highlighted just how deplorably bad her skills at close

combat really were.

Ami grasped at the dagger-like weapon still lodged in the back of her neck. Its haft was short, and the angle awkward. She just couldn't get a proper grip on it, and despite her best efforts, it didn't budge. The blue-haired girl blushed when she realised that she must be making a fool out of herself, stumbling around while yanking furiously at the handle sticking out of the back of her neck. She looked around. As she had feared, onlookers were everywhere, staring at her with rapt attention. With a sigh, Ami pointed at the closest troll. "You! Can you please come over here?"

The singled-out green creature shrank back. "Me? What I do?"

"Just get over here and give me a hand," Ami ordered impatiently. She couldn't move her neck properly with the weapon stuck in it.

Walking like a condemned man, the troll approached, eyeing the smaller girl warily.

"Could you help me with that, please? I can't get it out on my own." Ami turned partly away from the creature while pointing her index finger at the handle protruding from what looked like a bloody wound in her neck. The troll's fingers approached the weapon cautiously, shaking all the while, as if the black handle was a poisonous snake that could turn to bite him at the slightest provocation. He touched it and immediately jerked his hand backward, surprised at the temperature of the ice-cooled metal. Gathering his courage, he tried again and freed the short blade with a yank that nearly ripped Ami of her feet. Immediately, he dropped the weapon and scampered back to his group.

"Thank you," Ami said, squatting down to gather up the discarded murder implement. A dull layer of condensation had formed on the its surface. She wanted to hand the troll a gold piece for his trouble, but she was no longer able to tell him apart from his compatriots. Already, she could hear them whispering. "...cold as death... " "... not human... " "...tell you, must be favoured by..."

The blue-haired girl shrugged. At least, this time around, the rumours wouldn't be horribly humiliating, but now she had better go

and find Jered, just in case there were assassins after him, too.

The room was large, brightly lit by the late morning sun, and exuded an atmosphere of calm elegance that could not even be ruined by the rows upon rows of animal and more exotic heads mounted on the wall, each one annotated with a silver plaque that named a date. Despite the soothing tones of the hazelnut panelling, the meeting conducted underneath the sightless stare of the trophies was anything but calm.

"I don't want to hear it! Find her lair, you incompetent cretins!" Baron Leopold shouted, slamming his meaty fist down on the map on the table. The fine porcelain tableware rattled under the blow, spilling some of its contents on the embroidered purple napkin. The Baron didn't care, and turned to the cowering courtiers. "Do you understand me? I will not let Arachne challenge me again!" The courtiers assembled around the table glanced at each other.

"But your Lordship, the capital is safe from her, and the expenses-" One of the haggard old men interrupted, mumbling into his beard.

"Screw the stupid peasants in their border regions and let the spiders eat them, huh?" the ends of Leopold's moustache were quivering as the noble spoke, working up a fine rage.

"My Lord, I wasn't implying that-" the advisor paled. Most of the Baron's staff had perished during Arachne's devastating initial attack over two weeks ago, when poisonous spiders had emerged from water taps, sinks and toilets during the dead of night all over the richer parts of town, and he had only ascended to his position recently. It looked as if he was in danger of losing what he had come to think of as a cushy job in the very near future.

"Don't you try to talk your way out of it, you snake. I do not tolerate dishonest fools!" Leopold raised his cup of tea, gripping the delicate handle so hard that it burst. Liquid spilled on the large man's barrel-shaped chest, forming a darker spot on the burgundy cloth.

"Do calm yourself, Leopold," a wrinkly man with a long white beard,

who was half-sunken into the deep cushions of his armchair, said. "Your behaviour is unseemly. And what about that other Keeper threatening our lands?"

Leopold took a deep, calming breath. "Valet! More tea!" Ignoring the approach of the young blond man in servant's garb who placed a fresh cup from his tablet in front of his liege before retreating discretely, he addressed the wizard's question. "Mercury? Last I heard, she was fooling around with her reaper in some place called 'Evercalm' in the neighbouring kingdom. No casualties, strangely enough."

There were hasty footsteps coming from the halls outside, and then the door flew open. Abbot Durval stood in the opening, holding his staff. The two fully armoured guards visible behind him saluted at the sight of their liege. The holy man came to the point at once. "Baron, I fear there is Evil amongst us!" His gaze swept over the room, coming to a stop on the curly-haired valet, whose steel-blue eyes suddenly seemed shadowed by his bangs even as a smirk appeared on his face.

Ami found her errant employees leaving a foreboding building, whose main entrance's door frame was formed by the improbably muscled arms of a sculpted demon. The knuckles of the stone limbs' hands were resting on the ground to the sides of the worn stairs leading up to the building. Above the entrance loomed the horned head of the sculpture, its gaping maw filled with bleached skulls. The construction had no markings, because the sense of pure, undiluted evil emanating from its interior was enough of a door sign. This was clearly a temple to the dark gods. She looked up at Jered, who was pale and nearly running from its grounds. The orcs flanking him seemed more relaxed, even happy, and easily kept pace with him as they descended the stairs.

The brown-haired man quirked an eyebrow up when he saw Ami, and she could see his eyes wander up and down her body, lingering a bit longer than absolutely necessary on her chest area. Crossing her arms, she addressed him. "Well, Jered? Did you find out anything?"

"Indeed. I must compliment you on your outfit, its cut is rather flattering," the wavy-haired man approached so he could lower his voice, and fell in step at Ami's side. "I'm afraid my information is sparse and not at all uplifting. The priesthood has a choke-hold on almost all information about the dark gods, and it took a sizeable donation to loosen a few tongues."

"Go on," Ami encouraged, falling into analytical mode with practised ease.

"First, Azzathra the Mighty Tyrant. He is the god of using strength, brute force, martial skill, and intimation in order to force your will on everyone weaker. He does not dispute the power of magic, but spurns those who use it or trickery in order to further their agendas, and takes great pleasure in humiliating them at every opportunity."

"Sounds like a god of schoolyard bullies," Ami commented after a moment of reflection.

Jered shrugged his shoulders. "They would meet his approval, I assume. In any case, he most favours the more brutish and physically inclined creatures of the Underworld, such as fallen knights, orcs, and," his voice became apologetic, "horned reapers."

"And the plot thickens," Ami sighed dejectedly. "Great, so he is biased. Did you also find out the rules for the duel?"

The brown-haired man nodded enthusiastically. "Actually, that was the easiest part. Apparently, duels of that sort happen fairly regularly in his honour, and are great public spectacles. Though I don't think a dungeon keeper has ever fought in them. The bad part is that Azzathra directly whisks away both combatants to an arena of his own choice, heals them both up to top condition, and then lets them have a go at each other. The inconvenient part is that magic used during the battle is mirrored. Beneficial enchantments are applied to each combatant. Aggressive spells hit both the target and the caster."

"The Reaper is immune to his own fireballs," Ami pointed out morosely. "Just wonderful. I'm no longer in the mood for exploration," she stated in a quiet voice and with hanging shoulders,

"let's go back."

A melon-sized ball of blinding white brilliance shot through room, casting the prone human bodies strewn across it into sharp relief with its glare that leeched colour from its surroundings. Its target raised a white-gloved hand dismissively, and the holy projectile stopped. Abbot Durval dropped to one knee, exhausted and steadying himself on his staff. His mouth was agape as he stared in disbelief at his stopped attack.

"Nice try, old man," Jadeite quipped, his form a dark silhouette that blocked the light streaming into the room from the tall window behind him. The figure clad in a grey uniform with red trimming gestured upward, and the ball changed course and burned its way through the ceiling, leaving the smell of charred wood behind. The blond was hovering in the air, above the fallen forms of his enemies. The wizard, one of the few who hadn't collapsed where they stood from his dark magic, was struggling in vain against an animated bear skin rug that had recovered some of the ferocity it had in life. "Nice try, but foolish! No human could match the power of a general of the Dark Kingdom! Ha ha ha ha-"At this point, the Baron stopped playing possum, grabbed the table, and batted him out of the closed glass window, all in the same smooth move.

Ami brooded in the library. By all accounts, her excursion into the Underworld had been a complete success, but the information she had gleaned had sucked all the enjoyment out of it. What *could* she do to cheer herself up? An idea suddenly struck her. Why not check up on her friends?

With a brief moment of concentration, a crystal ball appeared in front of her, dropping down to the table with a thud. Eagerly, she forced magic into the scrying device, prompting it to bridge dimensions. It filled with haze until an aerial view of the Hikawa shrine in Tokyo formed inside the glass. Eagerly, Ami-leaned in closer, zooming in on the figures she could see walking on the sunlit stairs. With a smile, she recognised the short, bald figure of Rei's grandfather,

gesticulating enthusiastically while talking to two businesswomen who were visiting his shrine. She zoomed in closer, searching for her friend, when she noticed the old man freeze suddenly. His bushy white eyebrows furrowed as he started to move his head around, as if searching the sky for something. Ami noticed that he was looking in her direction more often than not. Could he sense her presence? She watched the man clad in the white robes of a shinto priest dart into the building, only to return moments later carrying a stick with prayer strips attached, which he shook up and down in a purification ritual. Dumbfounded, she blinked when the image in her crystal ball started to flicker like a TV with bad reception. Alarmed, she channelled more magic into it, but to no avail. The view of the shrine dissolved back into featureless fog.

Ami frowned, and she could see two red reflections in the curved glass as her eyes glowed brighter. She liked grandpa Hino, but at the moment, she didn't have very charitable thoughts for him. Wait, she was being silly. At this time of the day, her friends would still be in school. Shaking her head at her own scatterbrainedness, she focused on the device once more.

"No damn warlock gets uppity in my city while I'm in it!" the Baron shouted into Jadeite's ear, grossing the vain general out with the spittle that splattered against his skin. The blond's croaked retort did not make it past Leopold's inordinately strong thumbs that were crushing Jadeite's windpipe. It took him most of his concentration to stay conscious, his face was already going purple, and his tongue felt dry. He had frankly no idea how the bear-like man had managed to get on his back, much less pin down his arms in the process, but the violent noble seemed intent on strangling the life out of Jadeite. Never mind the fact that both of them were floating high above the city and would both plummet to their deaths if he passed out. In the streets below, the humans were shouting and pointing up excitedly at the struggle. Wait, plummet. Maybe if he controlled the fall so he could crush the Baron between himself and the wall...

Seeing no other option, Jadeite cut the power to his hovering magic, using a last burst so the intertwined enemies were falling toward the castle's roof, rather than the paved yard much deeper below. Air

whistled past before the impact, which was much harder than Jadeite had braced himself for. Amidst a cacophony of breaking roof shingles, both opponents suddenly found themselves in the castle's attic, coated in white dust. Loosened tiles and wood splinters were still raining down on them, but Jadeite could feel the bulk of the enemy below him, having cushioned the impact. Leopold' stranglehold had slackened, and the dark general greedily sucked air into his lungs. Then, he heard a growl nearby, and let out a gasp when piercing pain shot through his shoulder. The bastard had bit him! He had actually *bit* him!

"Noooooo!" the heart-rending scream echoed through the smoothed corridors of Ami's dungeon, originating in the library. Cathy dropped what she was doing. That had been Mercury's voice! Pushing everything and anything out of her way, she didn't stop sprinting until she reached the blue-haired girl, who was kneeling in front of a crystal ball, shoulders drooping and looking as if her entire world had just collapsed. In passing, the swordswoman noted that the spherical device was showing a classroom.

"Mercury! What happened?" She put a comforting arm around the depressed girl's shoulder, wondering just what could have elicited that reaction.

Ami turned to her, tears quivering in the corners of her eyes, and stammered out miserably "I- I have fallen behind in my coursework!"

Cathy blinked mutely.

Ami was in a foul mood. First, she had learned that Azzathra's challenge was most likely a sham intended to humiliate and kill her, then grandpa Hino had unknowingly stymied her efforts to connect to her old life, and finally, Cathy had laughed at her for caring about her grades. The young Keeper's irritation was, however, giving her the required courage to do what Jered had called 'hold court', but what she now knew consisted of her sitting on Malleus' opulent, amethyst-studded throne while her minions took turns whining at

her.

Well, maybe she was being a tiny bit unfair there, but some of them were just - argh! Like the four scandalously-clad women in black leather outfits that seemed purpose-built to mess with her still-confused libido. They were standing in respectful distance of the throne, kneeling on the purple-grained marble. However, it was not their overt sensuality, but their request that was filling Ami with disgust. "Absolutely not! I will not rebuild the torture chamber! Do not bring it up again!"

"But Keeper," the speaker of the group began, talking through her face-concealing black mask, "you can't deny the merits of-"

"I could make you join the Reaper in prison," Ami drawled dangerously, hoping that would make these sick, sick women back down.

"Oh, splendid idea, Keeper! Thank you!," one of them answered in a cheerful, husky voice, and bowed deeply. The razor-sharp blades attached to her gloves clicked together in anticipation.

Ami's hair stood on end as the quartet got up and turned to leave, rolling their hips as they walked. "That's not what I meant! Don't do anything physical!"

"Oh Keeper, you are too cruel-"

"NEXT!"

Her next petitioners were a delegation of bile demons. The bulky red blobs of fat dragged themselves forward on their arms, having no legs or feet to support their near spherical bodies. The other creatures gathered in the throne room made way for them, but whether it was out of respect or because of their body odour was hard to tell. Ami certainly feared for the scent receptors in her nose when the group stopped where the dark mistresses had just been.

"Keeper Mercury," the foremost of the red creatures said with a voice that sounded like flatulence, "when are you going to assign us new dwellings? You destroyed our old ones almost a day ago!"

Mercury leaned forward. She hadn't done anything of the sort. In any case, there were still some free housing areas, according to her mental map of the dungeon. "Could you be a bit more specific, please? I am not sure what you are talking about. All I did was having the disgustingly filthy sewers cleaned out."

"Those- those were NOT sewers," the lead demon grumbled, gritting his teeth.

Ami went green when understanding hit her. "You live in those disgusting pools of rotting muck?"

"Is there a problem with that?" the spherical demon asked, making the morning stars dangling from his horizontal horns swing in challenge.

"Most emphatically YES! Do you have any idea how unhygienic that is? And you are dragging the filth all over the dungeon! Go take a bath, right now!" Mercury looked ill when she gave the order, and backed away from the smelly creature as far as her throne would let her.

Appalled, the bile demon prostrated himself in front of the throne. "Keeper, I do not know how I displeased you, but please reconsider! We shall wait until you are ready, but you can't really demand that we," its flabs of fat shuddered in revulsion, "bathe."

"I can, and I do. In fact, don't come back until you are clean! Orcs, take them away!" The blue-haired girl watched as the more pinkish creatures approached the bile demons, flinching at the smell. Two of the humanoids grabbed one arm each and started dragging the fat minions toward the exit.

"NOO! MEEeeercy!"

While the the bile demons were being removed from the room, Ami watched the ranks of creatures standing further in the back. There had been a lot more when she had just started the first audience, she thought. From the corner of her eye, she spotted some minions trying to move unobtrusively toward the exit. Maybe they were getting wise to the fact that today wasn't a good time to draw the

Keeper's attention?

"Who is next?" she asked, sounding as if she was daring anyone to step up. To her chagrin, there were footsteps approaching. "Who- Jadeite! What happened to you?" Ami's eyes went wide as she surveyed the bedraggled-looking figure limping towards her throne. The dark general's uniform was ripped in places, his hair was white with dust, and he was sporting not one, but two black eyes, granting him a passing resemblance to a tanuki.

The curly-haired blond gave a court bow as he stopped in front of the throne, but his smile was somewhat strained. "I have been investigating how Baron Leopold, as a mere human, managed to defeat a horned reaper."

Oh, this was bad. Ami winced at the thought of how much damage the dark general had done to her prospective future diplomatic overtures if he had attacked the Baron. Still, she *needed* a solution, so if he had one... The red in her eyes brightened when she asked "And? Did you find out?"

"Ah, I thought you might want the pleasure for yourself." Like a circus director presenting his next act, he turned ninety degrees, holding his hand out toward the tall figure stepping through the alley between monsters. "Why don't you ask him yourself?"

Ami gasped when she recognised the tall, battered figure shuffling towards her with a blank stare, dressed in expensive silks and wearing a strange circlet on his head.

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A Solutionto the Reaper Problem?

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The knuckles of Ami's fingers whitened from gripping the armrests of her throne too hard. What had Jadeite done? The Baron, an implacable foe, was standing amidst her underlings, staring ahead with a blank expression. He may have been unarmed and unarmoured, but it was still unnerving having him here. The young Keeper was at a loss for words as her brain tried to come up with an appropriate reaction to the unexpected development. Regardless of what it would be, the last thing she needed was a crowd of useless onlookers. "You others, out! The audiences are over for today!"

Disappointed grumbling echoed through the throne room while the creatures obeyed hesitantly, shuffling toward the exit at a snail's pace. Upon reaching the doors, most minions stopped and looked back over their shoulders, eager to catch a last glimpse of the unfolding, gossip-worthy situation. The inevitable congestion caused the exodus to come to a complete stop. Recent events had hardly improved Ami's mood, and rather than wait patiently for the gaggle of monsters to sort themselves out, she used her Keeper powers to hasten their departure. Creatures vanished into thin air, and once the last of them had disappeared, the iron door leading into the chamber slammed shut, its wings rattling against the frame.

"Jadeite, I am torn about what to say," Ami began, keeping an eye on the calm-looking form of the Baron, as if he were a rabid animal she feared could attack her at any moment. "First, what did you do to him? I don't believe he would be so tranquil on his own accord."

If Jadeite had been expecting a better reception, he didn't show. "That circlet on his head," he pointed at the slim band of metal resting in the noble's short-cropped, greying hair, "is putting him under my complete control. While I met unexpected resistance in subduing him, I assure you that he is quite docile now."

"Oh." Ami nodded dubiously, looking both men over again. Her eyes

narrowed as she took in their battered states properly. "Is he all right? And are you all right? Did you hurt anyone else?" She stood up from her throne, her footsteps echoing mutedly on the marble as she inspected the duo more closely, walking around them like a shark circling its prey.

"Nothing serious, just rendered anyone who attacked me unconscious," the dark general said, tracking the blue-haired Keeper with his eyes.

With an audible sigh of relief, Ami now approached the rigid figure of the Baron. He was shorter than the Reaper, or even Boris, but still loomed a good head and a half over her. A large tear in his silk shirt allowed her to gently touch the skin on his back with a faintly green-glowing hand. Did his fingers twitch at the touch? No, she must have imagined it. Focusing on probing deeper beneath the black-and blue bruise that extended beneath her fingertips, she quickly localised broken ribs, bruised muscles, torn ligaments, and inner bleeding. How was he still standing? Aghast, she started fixing the worst of the injuries. "Jadeite, he's hurt badly! Just how much of a resistance did you encounter? Sit down," she ordered the Baron, who followed the command without hesitation.

"Snyder!" With a wrench of violated space, the red-and white-robed acolyte suddenly stood in the room, staggering as he dropped down a finger's breadth to the floor. He blinked in confusion, looking at Mercury, and slowly put the fine-pointed chisel he had in his hand into a pocket.

"What? Oh, hello. I don't think I will ever get used to-" his brown eyes went wide when he took in who else was in the room. "Is that...? How? And WHY?"

"I'm still trying to work that out myself," Ami waved off his questions. "He's hurt, though. Can you please help him? I'm still not as fluent in healing spells as I'd like to be." There was only so much one could do with necromancy, after all. One of these days, she would have to look into acquiring books on real healing magic.

The redhead nodded. After only a short glance at the injured nobleman, he turned back to Ami. "Could you move us to the

infirmary? This place has none of the amenities I would require for treating him." A moment later, he found himself in a brightly lit room with six empty and surprisingly clean beds. The Baron materialised over one of them, sinking deep into the mattress wrapped in white linen. Mercury and her newest minion appeared too, standing next to each other.

The blue-haired girl looked at the noble with a thoughtful expression. Coming to a decision, she also transported Jered and Cathy into the room. Maybe their input would help her come up with a way to do damage control. She let the couple regain their bearings and faced the bruised former dark general.

"Jadeite, I really wish you had asked me before doing something as disruptive as kidnapping the baron of a country, and I'm sure you are smart enough to realise that yourself. So why didn't you?"

"Because you would probably have rejected my plan," Jadeite responded, not even pretending to sound apologetic. He would not ever have spoken like this to Beryl, of course, but he had the feeling that Mercury would let him get away with it. "And, frankly speaking, you can't afford to. Don't try to deny it, now that I have seen the Reaper, I know that you will need all the help you can possibly get."

"Oh, shit!" Cathy, recognising the Baron, turned her head so fast that her long blonde hair whistled through the air like a whip, forcing Jered to dodge. She glared at Jadeite, eyebrows furrowing deeply. "I can't believe it! So that's where you disappeared to so quickly!" Turning to Ami, she apologised. "I'm sorry, I didn't think just telling him about the Baron being able to beat the Reaper would cause him to do something so harebrained."

"Harebrained? It worked fine! Despite your misgivings, I managed to beat him without problems," Jadeite smirked smugly, crossing his arms!"

"I didn't think you'd consider it a dare! How childish can you get?" Cathy fumed. "And 'without problems' is a bald-faced lie! You are bleeding, and your face is coloured like a badger's!"

"It's nothing," the curly-haired general grumbled.

"Oh? Well, then you won't mind if I do this," Cathy said, stepping behind the dark general and jabbing her index finger into his side just below a gash in his uniform.

"Ow! Are you crazy?" Jadeite winced and stumbled, then batted the woman's probing hand away.

"If that's nothing, then I'd hate to see your 'something'," the swordswoman looked at the tip of her finger, which was glistening reddish.

"She has a point," Ami agreed, "you could use some healing, too. Lie down over there," she ordered, pointing at one of the remaining free beds.

"I'm fine," Jadeite protested, not moving from his spot. Rather than arguing, an exasperated Ami just picked him up with her Keeper powers. "Now wait a minute! Hey!" he found himself floating horizontally in the air and unceremoniously lowered onto the soft mattress. Apparently, Mercury wasn't putting up with any more insubordination, at least for now.

"Now take that jacket off so I can see what's wrong with you. The shirt too," Ami added once she caught a glimpse of the garment under his uniform jacket, blushing furiously even as she gave the order. Jadeite narrowed his eyes at her, but just harrumphed as he followed the order ever so slowly.

"There's no need to be embarrassed," Jered teased from where he was sitting on one of the beds, watching their antics from a safe distance, "after all, if Keeper Mercury wanted to look at your scrawny chest, she could just peep on you while you are changing - she can see everything in this dungeon she desires," the brown-haired man pointed out, chuckling. At least until Cathy elbowed him in the ribs.

"What? I wouldn't!" Ami sputtered, her face taking on the same same colour as a ripe tomato, and she raised both hands defensively, waving them left and right.

Jadeite harrumphed again, glaring sideways at the green-clad man.

Only a faint colouring of his cheeks betrayed that he was uncomfortable with that revelation. At the very least, it would make keeping secrets difficult.

Clearing her throat, Ami tried to speak in a professional tone of voice. "That wasn't very nice, Jered. Now, let's see. Oh." She had a good view of the now shirtless Jadeite, and the remnants of the recent battle were clearly visible as a network of bruises, cuts, and burns. "What made this? She asked, pointing at a a charred-looking mark.

"Hot fire rake," the dark general said shortly.

"And that?" the blue-haired girl asked, putting her green-glowing hands over two strange puncture wounds just above Jadeite's heart.

"Tuning fork," he grumbled.

"Tuning fork? How-"

"Look, could you just concentrate on the healing already?" the blond snapped, "Or do you enjoy pawing at me too much? Ow!" A wince banished his short-lived smirk when an embarrassed Ami put too much pressure on one of his wounds at the unexpected accusation.

"That's one hell of a love bite," Cathy got another dig in, looking at the teeth mark's on Jadeite's shoulder, "no problems, eh?"

The dark general groaned in irritation. "Why don't you use your time more meaningfully and interrogate the Baron? That's why I brought him here in the first place!"

"Point," the other blonde conceded, turning to look at Snyder, who was still treating the injured prisoner, who had acquired a more healthy colour in the meantime.

"That does sound like a good idea," Ami said quietly. "Let's see whether the information he has was worth jeopardising all possible peaceful future relations."

"Well, he should be out of danger by now," Snyder informed her, "in fact, he is recovering astonishingly well, faster than even my skills

can explain completely." The acolyte looked nervous and unhappy as he backed away from the occupied bed to give the others a clear line of sight.

"Baron Leopold, are you still in pain?" Ami asked, getting no reaction from the large man sitting on the bed.

"Answer her questions," Jadeite instructed, which prompted the noble to speak. A fine layer of sweat was forming on his brow, above the large and bushy eyebrows.

"I am not," he finally said, grey eyes looking straight ahead.

"That's good to hear," Ami said with a small smile. "Okay, you defeated a horned reaper in close combat about two weeks ago. What allowed you, as a human, to overcome the Reaper's advantages and do so?" The blue-haired girl leaned forward, muscles tensing with anticipation as she waited for the answer. This could be the solution to her problem.

Leopold seemed to hesitate, but Ami couldn't tell whether it was because he was collecting his thoughts or actively resisting the mind-control. His projecting moustache quivered as he spoke. "A combination of factors. A body steeled by over thirty years of daily training, the experience to read the monster's moves and the reflexes to act on this information. Natural speed and strength inherited from an angelic ancestor far up the family tree, and unsurpassed adamantine equipment enhancing these attributes even more."

With each item on the list, Ami's face became longer. Only the final one sounded like something she could potentially make use of. On further consideration, it occurred to her that she might also qualify for the second-last item on the list, if demonic contamination was roughly comparable with divine ancestry. She doubted she was that lucky. "Adamantine?"

"Ah, that is an incredibly rare metal that is mined exclusively by the dwarves in the north, who are also the only ones who know the secrets to properly working it. It's ideal for weapons and armour, and has some other interesting properties. Legend has it that ages ago,

it played a pivotal role in denying the dark gods entry to this world," Snyder lectured. "However, no two sources can agree on what, or even whether something like that actually took place, so I would take this story with a grain of salt. In any case, the metal is exceedingly rare and valuable."

Ami nodded at the explanation, then focused on the Baron again, noticing that he was sweating harder and that the muscles in his neck were clenching under the skin. "If someone of my size and build wanted to fight a horned reaper, what advice would you give them?"

"Don't go anywhere near it," Leopold replied without hesitation.

"Assume that this is inevitable," Ami sighed.

"In that case, get too close for it to use its scythe effectively. It can still turn you into a smear on the ground with its regular limbs, but they will be moving slightly more slowly than the blade." The Baron's reply came slowly, and he stalled between words. The circlet on his head gave off a few sparks

"I don't think your trinket is going to keep him in check for much longer, " Cathy shouted, directed at Jadeite. Ami felt inclined to agree. She could read the effort he was putting into resisting on his contorting face. Well, better safe than sorry. With a mental flick, she picked him up along with the mattress he was sitting on, and put him into her safe prison. Appearing before the bars, she was just in time to see his arms rise upward slowly, as if they were straining against a great weight. Inexorably, they inched toward the evil headband.

Fighting the influence of the mind-control jewellery was causing him great discomfort, Ami could deduce from his grimace. Not being one to condone suffering, she remotely plucked the offending object from his head - he would manage to take it off by himself soon enough, and this way she could have a closer look at it later.

Immediately, the Baron jumped to his feet with a great, angry roar. His now wide-awake eyes immediately focused on the slip of a girl waiting outside his cell. "Keeper Mercury," he spat venomously, "what heinous plots against my nations are you scheming now?

Know that even with me captured, my realm will not bow to you!" Despite the steel grate separating them, Ami couldn't help but feel intimidated by the imposing figure walking toward her, body language speaking of hostility.

Ami inclined her head. "I'm very sorry, this is all a big misunderstanding. Jadeite acted without my knowledge. I have no designs on your nation, I assure you."

"Huh, you don't really expect me to believe that, do you?" the Baron replied, glaring at her.

"No," Ami looked sad, "people just automatically assume the worst of me now, whatever I do. Especially when I'm telling the truth."

"My heart's bleeding for you, fiend," Leopold replied in a deadpan tone of voice, unimpressed.

"See? That's exactly what I'm talking about. It's very, very frustrating," Ami complained tiredly.

"Those were some strange questions you were asking me," the Baron changed the topic. "Trying to use me to find and remove your Reaper's weaknesses? Why don't you come closer and I'll tell you." He grinned winningly, gripping the bars of the cell. Ami took a step back, well out of arm's reach.

"I was more hoping to exploit them myself. He'd kill me if I gave him a chance!"

"So the rumours about you are true, and it ran away? Despicable." Leopold looked down on her, sneering in revulsion.

"NO! That's all based on a misunderstanding!" A pause, and then her shoulders sagged. "You are not believing me again."

"Why should I? You have tried to control me with your filthy magic, and I'm now stuck in your prison instead of coordinating the defence against your rival Arachne!" The Baron raged, losing the tenuous control over his temper. He walked up and down inside his room quickly, muttering curses under his breath.

Ami froze. "Arachne is back? Where?"

"Do you think you'd have still found me in my castle if I knew where she's attacking from, you twit? " the large man shouted.

"There is no reason to be impolite about it." This was going nowhere, and his information had been near worthless. Stupid Jadeite, she ought to... suddenly, the girl's face lit up with a smile. Maybe she could solve an old problem and get some petty revenge in the process. "Baron, I propose a deal-"

"Never, servant of darkness!"

Ami massaged her temples, feeling a headache coming. She had considered asking him for amnesty for Cathy, Jered, and Snyder in exchange for his freedom, but she had no idea what an extorted promise like that would be worth, and she wouldn't risk their well-being on it. "Please let me finish. I'm planning to let you go back where you belong, because I didn't want you here in the first place, okay?" The Baron let out a disbelieving snort. "Now, I have another hero here who got unlucky when he tried to attack me. You might remember Boris? He ran afoul of some chaos magic. The trouble is that he got all mixed up with one of my minions, and I have no way to separate them, but your light priests do." She paused, watching Leopold carefully for a reaction. His expression remained stoic and unreadable. "What I want is for the two to be separated, and to get my minion back. In exchange, I offer to find the location of Arachne's new dungeon for you."

Leopold remained silent for a long time, furrowing his brow as he considered the offer, searching for hidden hooks. "Your minion is some being of great power, I assume?"

Ami shook her head. "Just a tentacle monster."

The Baron actually blinked at that reply. "I don't think I want to know why you want something like *that* returned. Very well, I accept, provided you keep your word, and don't try any tricks. If you do, the deal is null and void."

"Good. Jadeite!" Ami had to wait for a while before the dark general

shimmered into existence next to her, time he presumably used to put his shirt back on.

"Mercury?" he asked with a faint bow, unfailingly polite before the outside observer waiting in his cell. The unfamiliar smirk on the blue-haired girl's face when she turned to him made his own falter for a moment.

Jadeite glared at Mercury, who had a hard time hiding her amusement behind her raised right hand. "You can't expect me to carry *that*!" the dark general pointed at the cage containing a slimy thing covered in black hair. There were other features, like eyes, hands, and mouths, but they weren't arranged in any logical way. The unholy hybrid was about bear sized, but its chaotic mess of tentacles made getting any accurate measure a futile task. As if reacting to the accusingly pointed index finger, the fusion howled, and, a long, thin tentacle stretched out through a gap in the cage's mesh and wrapped around the blonde's boots at ankle height.

"Please do not blame me for my co-inhabitant's mindless aggression, he-"

The mental voice turned into a sudden scream when a zigzagging bolt of energy sprang from Jadeite's gloved hand, striking the abominable creature and causing it to spasm and shudder. Its violent twitches had the same effect as a dog shaking himself, and the mucus trapped within the monster's beard-like hair went flying in every direction, showering the dark general standing nearby. He grimaced, baring his teeth, and intensified his glare in the giggling Mercury's direction. A trickle of slime ran down his forehead, getting into his left eyebrow, which started twitching violently.

"Consider it your reprimand for not consulting with me before pulling your stunt with the Baron," Ami said. "But if that's not to your taste, I have some bile demons that need washing." This was true. The task of administering a bath to the fat blobs of lard and muscle was not going well. After good initial progress by her golems, which were blessed with no sense of smell and had taken to the task of kicking the spherical demons back into the soapy bath water with frightening

enthusiasm, their unwilling victims had organised their resistance and were now barricaded in the bathroom.

Jadeite gave Ami a dark look, grabbed the limp creature, then faded into vertical upwards-shooting lines, taking the quivering and slightly smoking being with him.

The girl nodded to herself in satisfaction. The Boris problem at least was out of her hair now. Time to find Arachne, and then get properly started on finding a way to live past the next equinox. The rules enforced by Azzathra were a problem, to say the least. She was fairly certain that, if beneficial enchantments were shared, then the Reaper would be profiting from her senshi enhancements too. Just what she needed. However, the armour approach offered at least a potential way out. If it was the equipment itself that had enhanced physical attributes instead of bestowing them on the wearer, it should bypass the sharing clause. Of course, the wearer would need some way to control the gear as if it was her own body, or the forces exerted would kill her just as easily as the Reaper would. At least, this tied in somewhat with her former golem research. She would assemble her team and get to work on it. One magical armour powerful enough to match a horned reaper. Well, nobody could accuse her of a lack of ambition.

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Creepy Crawlers

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To keep her deal with the Baron, Ami only had to find Arachne's new dungeon - not that she wouldn't have done so even without that added incentive, now that she knew the monster was back. It was her duty to protect innocent people from evil, and the enemy Keeper qualified as the worst possible kind of villain. However, this didn't mean that she had to do all of the work personally. She stalked past the row of warlocks bent over a long table and glanced at the active crystal balls into which the magicians were staring with concentration. So far, the images in the glowing scrying devices showed only rainy countryside, farmland, and the occasional unsuspecting villagers working the fields. Ami stopped to let an imp, bowed under the weight of the recharge battery it was carrying, pass. The metal blocks with winding, inlaid patterns were one of Snyder's creations, designed to capture some of the abundant mana flowing from Ami's dungeon heart and make it available for use to her minions. One application of which she was currently seeing in action: a whole row of dark magic users casting detection spells with power requirements that usually made them the privilege of Keepers. Even those did not use this particular spell, colloquially known as 'Sight of Evil', with reckless abandon due to the cost, but Ami had no such concerns. She would have been stupid to not use the tremendous additional mana flow that her being a senshi added to the dungeon heart's output.

"Keeper Mercury, I have located something that looks like enemy activity," one of the warlocks raised his voice over the droning arcane mumblings of his peers.

Ami made her way over to him and leaned forward to peer into the sphere. The golden embroidery on her black jacket gleamed in the white light that was projecting an artificial pallor on her face. Within the crystal ball, the image showed a gnarled tree standing at the border between two wheat fields, only a stone's throw away from the muddy road. At first, Ami didn't see the sheep sized spider lurking

among the tree branches, well camouflaged by its mottled green and brown pattern. Only the movement of its spindly legs when it ascended higher drew her attention.

"Well done," she complimented the warlock. "It was walking through the fields when you spotted it?"

The man nodded. "Coming from the direction of the hills," he pointed out. The view in the crystal sphere panned out to show a group of forested bumps in the landscape, looking drab and hazy through the rain.

"Okay, keep an eye on the thing," Ami instructed. "Everyone! Focus your efforts around this area!" She highlighted the target region on the large map of her command centre by having one of the colourful liquid golems inside flatten itself out over it. "I'll go have a closer look at this spider personally."

A quarter of an hour later, Ami had the tree in question within her sights. After moving the golem body she was once again possessing across the continent, she had homed in on her target by following the instructions that her minions at the home base whispered into her mind. The long, green blades of the growing crops concealed her squatting form from sight, and the rain pattering on her back felt like ice as she observed the spider through her visor. Once more, she was under Jadeite's glamour, reasoning that a human girl would frighten the locals less than a walking ice statue would, in case they spotted her. Besides, if Arachne thought she had a reasonable chance at killing her rival, she might commit more forces than she would otherwise.

The eight-legged creature in Ami's sights was clinging to a branch and staring at the distant village, unmoving. She wiped the raindrops off of her visor and resumed her observation of the scout. The object of her scrutiny wasn't the arachnid itself, but the thin link that was invisible to normal senses and connected the spider monster to an enemy dungeon heart. At this distance, it was hard to make out the green-shimmering connection, but at least the direction was clear. A thin line segment overlapping the map on the senshi's visor

appeared, starting at the tree the spider was lurking in. It narrowed down the possible locations for Arachne's dungeon, but to get the exact coordinates, the monster would have to move, so that Ami could draw a second line segment. The enemy base would be where the two crossed. Rising from her crouch, Ami spread her arms and brought them forward. "Shabon Spray Freezing!"

The blast of supercooled bubbles springing forth from her palms deliberately missed the creature, striking the trunk below instead. In the wake of the azure glow, the wood remained encased in a layer of wind-swept looking ice, startling the spider in the crown out of its inactivity. It dropped out of the tree on a silken string and charged across the field as soon as the tips of its gangly legs touched the ground. Ami held her position, keeping her gaze focused on the creature up until it was less than ten metres away. With a high-pitched shriek, the many-eyed thing lunged, seemingly hanging in the air for a split second at the apex of its leap. Ami's eyes narrowed and flashed red for an instant before she moved, darting aside. The enemy landed where she had just stood, sending up a spray of mud as its frozen legs shattered from the impact. While committed to the motion, the monster had stood no chance at dodging the magical attack that its opponent had pulled out of Keeper storage. Just to make sure the spider was really dead, Ami walked up to the iced-over debris and kicked the head off the rump. There. This thing wouldn't be feasting on any villagers.

Looking back at her visor, she quickly determined that the lines tracing back to the enemy dungeon converged at a point somewhere beyond the hills. She transmitted this information to her supporting minions at home, via imp-scribbling. If only the researcher she had put on the job of creating a proper communication spell would produce some results already, she thought impatiently. Having the little minions paint each individual letter on a slate was rather cumbersome.

"All right, we are looking at the dungeon now," she heard Cathy's voice in her mind. *"Let's see... oh boy, that's not going to be easy to clean out. Wait, let me get a better look."*

Ami focused on seeing what was happening in her own dungeon, the forming mental picture displaying the crystal balls lined up in her

command centre. They were showing deep shafts, rather than rooms, all filled with thick white webbing and cocoons that adhered to their steep walls. Arachne was making no concessions to the needs of creatures that could not fly or walk on the walls this time. And of course, there were spiders everywhere, reaching in scale from no bigger than a palm to the size of a horse, without counting the legs. The sheer amount of wriggling chitin was enough to give anyone nightmares. Going deeper, the scrying revealed that the dungeon heart was once again positioned on the ceiling, rather than the ground floor. A thick network of sticky webbing zigzagged down the shaft, blocking the access route. The blue-haired girl couldn't help but agree with Cathy's assessment. Any army trying to get through this dungeon would have to deal with the inaccessible terrain as well as the inhabitants. It would be a meatgrinder.

Seeing that this was the case, Ami knew that she had to at least try to weaken this dungeon's defences before she disclosed its location to the Baron. But how? She had the imp scribble another question to the swordswoman in command of her forces.

"No, there are only imps and spiders within the dungeon, nobody else. At least nobody else alive." the telepathic voice of the blonde replied. Ami nodded once in grim satisfaction. She had some vermin to fumigate.

The entrance to Arachne's dungeon was not hidden very well, if one knew where to look for it. Ami's footsteps rustled on the wet forest ground as she approached the small clearing surrounding a simple hole leading down. The giant grey spiderwebs hanging like drapes from the surrounding trees were a dead give-away. Accompanying the senshi were eight ice simulacrums - as many as she could afford while also keeping her floating dungeon crewed. She would be able to replace them many times over though before she would tire herself out, especially if she took care to not die in the possessed body. Ami took another step forward and felt a shudder go through to her body when the ground suddenly felt alien and hostile. This must have been the border of Arachne's territory. Quickly, the blue-haired girl took several steps back. She couldn't use many of her abilities on enemy land.

Activating her visor once more, she surveyed the area around the gaping abyss. A series of warning signs flashed brightly, denoting the locations of hidden pits surrounding the dungeon's entrance. At the bottom of each of the web-padded depressions lurked a spider, coiled to jump out of the trapdoor covering its lair and drag an unsuspecting victim inside. This, Ami figured, was only a minor inconvenience. "Shabon Spray Freezing!"

A thick slab of ice now covered the lid leading down to the closest spider's hideout, and the monster went frantic, scrabbling at the blocked exit with its forelegs to no avail. The senshi quickly repeated the process for the other six traps. The last of the ambushing creatures got wise to her idea and was struck in mid-dash by the scintillating stream of bubbles as it tried to escape its lair. Unable to move its stiffened limbs, it sank back into the depression, hitting the ground with a dull thud. So far, so good. Ami hadn't even had to direct her minions into danger. Now, she would have to get as many enemies to come to her as possible. Fortunately, she had a tool that would allow her to properly fumigate the spiders. She had a few copies of the black, corrupted version of the Shabon Spray stashed away and ready for use. Even if she was reluctant to employ the vile, painful spell in normal circumstances, the creepy man-eating arachnids dwelling in the shafts below did not evoke any sympathy from her. Jumping up onto a low-hanging branch, she peered through the streaming rain again. Yes, from here, the angle should work out right. A brief instant of concentration later, and a column of black miasma shot from the girl's outstretched arms, hitting the circular hole leading underground right on. The smoke-like magic rushed down the tunnel, seeping into side-tunnels as it spread out.

Ami figured that the attack would be less devastating than the one time she had used it against Keeper Malleus' dungeon. This time, no previous assault had shattered doors that could be sealed, which would limit how far the attack penetrated. Nevertheless, she fell into a combat stance that was mirrored by the silent ice golems standing in a loose circle around Arachne's territory. The attackers did not have to wait long; pained shrieks and chitters from below approached rapidly, getting louder and louder. A stench of stale, mildewy air preceded the horde of panicked, wriggly things that clambered up each other in their haste to escape the poisoned

atmosphere within the dungeon. At the sight of the first spindly limbs protruding from the opening and setting foot on the wet ground, Ami opened fire, casting a regular Shabon spray freezing at the wave of chitin. Clusters of seeping eyes, damaged from the exposure to her caustic black fog, swivelled around and glared hatefully as they searched for their attacker. With unrestrained fury, the injured creatures re-oriented on the slim female figures standing tauntingly at the borders of the clearing and scuttled forward.

Ami saw her golems raise their arms, fingers pointed forward. The digits detached with popping noises, meeting the front line of the spiders. The beings faltered only for a moment before continuing their charge, gushing a pale, blood-like substance from gashes in their exoskeletons. It took Ami unleashing more of her stored arsenal to stop the circle of spiders expanding away from the entrance of the dungeon. Blue flashes of icy death struck without warning, flashing into existence in front of their targets and turning them into frozen, gleaming sculptures. More spiders were pouring out of the opening in the ground, and Ami aimed higher to strike at them as they climbed over their frozen predecessors. The bolt of spiralling bubbles flew true and would have spelled the end for its targets, if only those targets had not suddenly all disappeared.

Ami blinked, listening into the sudden silence that was only broken by the pattering of the rain and the muted grinding of her statues' limbs. There was no movement in the clearing except for the droplets of water running down the frozen bodies of the spiders she had killed. Keeper Arachne had reacted faster than anticipated, removing her minions from the line of fire. Ami grimaced, then looked up as a flash of movement in the lead-coloured sky above the clearing registered. As she watched, the black silhouette of a spider dropped down, growing bigger as it approached. Ami's eyes went wide. It was getting bigger much too quickly for this to be merely a result of closing the distance! She leapt backward, trying to put some room between herself and the open area. With an earth-shaking crash, a brown spider many times the size of a regular one landed over the pit leading into the dungeon. Fountains of mud sloshed around its feet as its hairy legs bent, cushioning the impact. Not yet fully risen from its crouch, the behemoth already whirled to face Ami, trampling vegetation at both ends of the clearing in the

process. Eight red orbs, big as street lights, flared in the monster's face.

"How does she do that?" Ami wondered, staring at the super-sized monster. She wished she had a spell like that! With a wince, she watched the left hind leg of the arachnid lash out, pulverising one of her golems under a claw that was as big as the statue's torso. The earth shuddered as the monster advanced. The blue-haired girl looked up at the belly of the spider, looming above the forest canopy. The last time she had attacked one of these with her Shabon Spray Freezing, it had done nothing.

"You. I remember you," the monster suddenly snarled, making the puddles on the ground vibrate with its rumbling voice.

Great, so Arachne was possessing this thing, too. Well, if that was the case, she probably wasn't paying attention to her dungeon heart. Maybe if Ami could keep her distracted, Jadeite could go for it? It was risky- Ami transported herself out of the path of the monster as it charged, breaking trees like straws and making the ground shake with each step. She appeared on the side of the clearing opposite of the monster, seeing the deep gouges it had clawed into the ground where she had just been standing. Her golems darted into the direction of the entrance to Arachne's underground realm. The enlarged spider would be unable to follow them into the pit, at least.

It didn't have to. Without crossing the intervening terrain, Arachne was suddenly between the fast-moving, transparent figures, turning into a whirling dervish of death. The trees swayed and the earth quaked as the giant spider stomped everything on the clearing into splinters with a tap-dance that would have looked comical under different circumstances.

"Darn it!" Ami's mental sight flashed to her own dungeon. Jadeite was only now reading her instructions. She'd have to keep the colossal monster occupied for some time yet. Well, if one Shabon Spray Freezing didn't work... She closed her eyes for a moment, blocking out the sight of the colossus that was still moving around in place, searching for more enemies. Suddenly, the clearing flared with aquamarine light, making the rain gleam like sapphires as the senshi emptied her entire stored arsenal of freezing spells in one go.

Comet-like streamers of blue light shot toward the oversized arachnid from all sides, striking it one after the other within intervals of less than a second between them. The first attack that struck did nothing but make the beast flinch, but as the barrage kept up, more and more of the spider was coated in gleaming ice. It let out an annoyed roar, struggling against the weight holding it down, then went silent as it was completely encased. Ami's self-confidence soared. That had worked much better than last time! Who needed a Reaper, anyway? She checked on Jadeite, seeing through his eyes. Oh, he was still looking at the map.

Clink. The blue-haired girl's head whipped back to the trapped spider. A long crack was running diagonally over the ice, obstructing her view through the otherwise transparent ice. Clink. Clink. More cracks sprang from the initial one and forked, expanding into a network. Within moments, large sheets of ice loosened and slid off the monster's body, who reared up, rising from the sparkling avalanche like a spectre of death. Ami blinked several times, hiding the 'o' of surprise formed by her mouth behind her hand. Maybe this situation called for something more lethal. With but a thought, the corrupted version of the Shabon Spray Freezing was retrieved from storage and hurled at the irritatingly resistant target. The spiny arrow of pitch-black ice whistled through the air, spinning around its own axis like a drill as it drew closer to the enormous spider's head, momentarily obstructing Ami's sight of the twitching mandibles. For an instant, a blindingly white flash drained all colour from the clearing, leaving nothing but a stark relief of black and white. Through squinting eyelids, the young Keeper saw her attack burst apart before reaching its target, exploding and raining razor-sharp shrapnel all over the clearing. The crackling arc of lightning shooting from the spider's maw continued onward, splitting the tree behind Ami down to the roots. Flames played around the wreckage, but quickly died down in the rain. More Keeper lightning played around the arachnid's mandibles, giving Ami the split second warning she needed to get out of the way. Reappearing on top of a tree, she summoned a new golem that darted off in a different direction. Spotting the movement, the spider lashed out at the forest with a scything strike of its forelimbs, cutting through the tree trunks as if it was mowing grass. Ami disappeared from her toppling perch, hoping that the cacophony of falling lumber would hide her.

Jadeite shimmered into visibility within a dark shaft that smelled of mould and looked bottomless in the poor illumination. A low, even heartbeat reverberated through the gorge, originating from above. Looking up, the dark general could see the beating enemy dungeon heart set into the ceiling about thirty metres above, staring down at him like an angry red eye. Spiderwebs attached to the curving stone walls of the cylinder-shaped shaft waved in a non-existing breeze like weightless curtains, partially obstructing the poison-green light from the motes of mana swirling just beneath the artefact. Disgusted, Jadeite wiped a few threads that had drifted onto his face off before sneering at the sight. What kind of moron put something that heavy into the ceiling, of all places? He'd just have to pull a little bit, and gravity would do the rest. Chuckling to himself, the dark general raised his arms above his head and gathered his power. And then, without warning, he started falling.

Ami took her hands off her head and peered out from underneath the smoking timber she had taken cover behind. Her gaze swept over the cratered, splinter-littered expanse of thoroughly churned mud that had been a clearing only minutes ago. There was no trace of her giant nemesis.

"Mercury," Cathy's agitated voice shouted in Ami's head, *"Jadeite just got turned into a frog! Do something!"*

Paling, the short-haired girl switched her view to see from Jadeite's perspective, and could only make out vast, blurry shapes rotating around as wind whistled past. He was falling! Reflexively, she yanked him out of danger. Only belatedly, she realised that she couldn't put him down anywhere, as he was not made of pure magic like her golems or spells, and she had no claimed territory nearby. Not that she would have just been able to drop him there, either. His momentum wasn't cancelled, and he'd go splat on the ground as soon as she pulled him back into the real world. Leaving him in storage wasn't an option either. She couldn't move beyond the normal sixty-kilometre range with anything non-conjured stashed away. Well, she could, but the object in question would be violently

expelled. There remained one option, then. Ami sighed. Her own body counted as her territory, and despite current appearances, was filled with water. As an amphibian, he should be able to survive within, and the liquid should cushion the fall somewhat. Feeling queasy at the idea, she went ahead anyway. It wasn't as if she had many alternatives. The ice girl heard something gurgle within her stomach region, and then felt a decidedly odd tickling sensation as the neo-animal scrabbled against the inner surface of her ice shell. "Ha! Stop," a giggle, "that! Uh-oh!"

The rain had stopped, mainly because the bulky spider body looming above was forming a horrifying roof. Ami disappeared from underneath its shadow just as claw ploughed through the mud where she had just been. What were her options? She had nothing to hurt the big spider with, and there was no way she could make it through the dungeon on her own if she had to scale the walls. With a heavy heart, she reached the conclusion that she currently lacked the power to take out her enemy, and retreated.

"Welcome back," Cathy greeted when the young Keeper appeared in front of her. "What happened? Did you rescue- WHAT THE HELL?" The blonde abruptly stopped speaking, and her eyes bugged out when the bluette suddenly burst like an overpressurised bottle, glamour fading as she did. The swordswoman shielded her eyes from the spray of cool water and ice shards, then lowered her arm and blinked at the sight in front of her. A thoroughly drenched Jadeite was on all fours, kneeling between the broken remains of an ice golem, and coughing up water. "Why - oh forget it, I don't even want to know!"

A black fog that hung in the room coalesced into Ami's form, shaping first a column, from which then the limbs and the head grew. The girl looked down at the mess on the floor, lips clenched into a thin line. Whether she was irritated at what had just happened, or at the failure to eliminate the enemy dungeon, Cathy couldn't tell.

"What is the status on Arachne's dungeon?" Ami asked, not looking up.

"The big spider is still outside, looking around," Cathy dutifully informed her. "The remaining uninjured spiders are withdrawing into the deeper tunnels around the heart chamber. Looks as if you frightened Arachne."

"That's all I did," the young Keeper said sadly, balling her hands into fists.

"I wouldn't say that," Jered looked up from where he was sitting near the board that the imps used to scribble down Ami's messages. "The inhabitants of the surrounding villages are fleeing because of the big spider monster in the hills. Arachne won't be able to catch them unaware now, if at all."

Ami's slouched posture became more relaxed upon hearing that. At least some good came from this expedition then, aside from a large number of dead spiders. Still, there was no question in her mind that she had failed: nothing she had thrown at Arachne's boosted monstrosity had more than slowed it down, and to make matters worse, her trump card, Jadeite, had been handily neutralised. The main problem, she figured, was that all her great Keeper powers only worked on friendly or unclaimed territory. When in the enemy dungeon, she would just be plain old Sailor Mercury, with her fog and her ice attack. Reasonably effective, but with no way to really hurt her enemies. And didn't that bode well for her upcoming duel with the Reaper? Well, aside from developing more effective tools, at least one solution came to mind to deal with her sad lack of mobility. She looked up, focusing on the dark general shivering in his wet, grey uniform.

"Jadeite. Teach me how you teleport."

Last edited: Aug 26, 2016

Magic Lesson

Originally on 2010-01-08T03:01:00

"I believe -that-," Jadeite lectured, smirking behind the force-bubble that protected him like a red-smeared windscreen, "is a sufficient demonstration of why we don't *just ignore the baby steps and skip ahead*." He was talking to the hazy black column of energy that crackling in the centre of the bare room, signing mock quotation marks with his fingers at the last part. A crimson coating of blood and tiny fleshy bits dribbled from the ceiling, running down the grooves between the large stone bricks forming the walls, onto the equally-soiled floor. The only spots of the chamber that still showed its original sandstone hues were the humanoid shadows on the walls, protected when their owners had taken the brunt of the blast with their bodies. With the exception of Jadeite, the three people standing in the room were making disgusted gagging noises and trying to brush the slimy, body-temperature covering off of themselves.

The black energy condensed into the form of Ami, whose eyes widened with fright as soon as she took a look around the crimson room. The paling girl's nose caught a whiff of the coppery smell hanging in the air, and her face turned green even as she pressed her hands on her mouth and disappeared.

"Weak stomach?" the dark general chuckled, despite the fact that the target of his jibe was no longer present.

"You damn arsehole! You could have warned us," the splatter-covered woman standing next to him complained loudly. She was not at all mollified by the fact that the grisly remains of the possessed imp were fading into transparency as they dissolved. The long-haired blonde kept glaring at Jadeite through the snowstorm of greenish motes that was tumbling down from her bangs.

"The lesson would lack a certain impact if I did," the dark general scowled at the swordswoman. "What are all you gawkers doing

here, anyway?"

"I was planning to learn something," Cathy replied, tapping her face dry with her handkerchief despite all of the yucky goo having evaporated without a trace already, "not to get showered in imp guts! If that's what you call teaching, I'm out of here!" The woman turned on her heel and stalked toward the door, which slammed shut behind her with a bang.

"Don't look at me, I'm just here because she is here. Was here," Jered corrected before following his girlfriend, shaking his head and throwing a last surly look at the grey-uniformed man.

That left only the short, red-haired acolyte in the room. Snyder seemed to shrink into himself at Jadeite's fixed stare.

"Well? Aren't you going to follow your friends?" Jadeite's white-gloved hand made an impatient gesture toward the door, which was as clean of gore by now as the rest of the room.

"Ahem, actually, Mercury insisted that I remain around," the young man explained, inspecting the hem of his white robes to see if all the gross stuff was gone. Checking for it on the red collar and stole wrapped around his upper torso would have been rather more difficult. Who would have thought that the colour exactly matched exploded imp innards?

"I did not agree to teach anyone but her," the blond general answered with a frown, crossing his arms.

"Oh, that is perfectly fine with me," the redhead replied, "I am not here to learn, but rather to observe and see if I can devise wards or counter-measures against the diverse kinds of magic you will undoubtedly be showing her." He frowned under his bowl cut, "though I dearly hope that not all of your lessons will be as spectacular as this one."

"Oh, I have found that an initial demonstration like this tends to weed out the less motivated students," Jadeite smirked.

"You have taught many students?" Snyder asked, his brown pupils

filled with a glimmer of doubt.

"Not really. I had subordinates for that," The dark general grinned, amused at the thought of him teaching his youma personally. He had observed the one or other lesson when he had nothing better to do, as there was precious little to actually alleviate boredom with in the Dark Kingdom, but he knew that he would have never had the patience to hold a class himself. "They used screw-ups like this to get rid of the more obnoxious students. Quite effective, and it made the others pay more attention too."

"I must say, that sounds rather evil," the acolyte seemed disgusted. "Wasteful too."

Jadeite shrugged. "They are youma. There's always more where they come from. Better the useless ones get weeded out early before too much education is wasted on them." A flicker of blue drew his gaze back to the centre of the room. "Ah, and there is the wayward student. I believe the dangers of attempting my style of teleportation without having mastered the basics first has sunk in?" he asked rhetorically. The girl suppressed a shudder, her complexion still sickly, and nodded. However, if anything, she seemed more determined to learn than before. So much for the plan to scare her off. Now he would have to spend his time trying to teach the finer points of dark power manipulation to a schoolgirl who lacked knowledge of even its most elementary basics, as well as an instinctive understanding of the art. Joy. "Very well, let's get started then. First..."

To Jadeite's surprise, teaching Mercury wasn't half as tiresome as he had feared. She was in many ways an exemplary student. Sitting at a school bench that had suddenly appeared when the lesson started, she was eagerly devouring his every word. He never once caught her currently blue eyes wander toward some distraction, she asked relevant questions whenever she needed something clarified, and she was also at the same time managing to take notes at a frantic pace. He certainly couldn't complain about having to repeat himself or about a lack of diligence. If anything, being the focus of so much intense, rapt attention was creeping him out.

Ami, for her part, was enjoying herself. In fact, she was as close to scholastic bliss as she had ever been in this strange world. She was studying an interesting subject and had her own private tutor to explain the basics of a magic system to her. Too bad there weren't any textbooks to make her feel more at home, though, and learning from a former Dark Kingdom general who had been her worst enemy only a few weeks ago was weird, too. It didn't help that Jadeite was an inexperienced teacher who sometimes switched between disciplines with little warning, or assumed prior knowledge of things that appeared self-evident to him, but were not. At least, he didn't seem to mind her asking question whenever he did the latter.

The blue-haired girl looked at the sheets of notes lying on her desk. The subjects she was learning were challenging, because many of the procedures and approaches seemed counter-intuitive to the nearly instinctual way with which she handled her senshi and dungeon heart magic. In addition, it also differed much from the content of the grimoires in her library, which seemed to rely a lot on rote learning. Ami thought back to when she had asked one of the warlocks about spells that could stop scrying, after she had unsuccessfully browsed Malleus' vast collection of books for one. The wrinkly-faced man had explained to her that, because there was no magical creature intrinsically immune to magical means of observation, there was also no template to study and base a spell on. She should request the knowledge as a boon from the dark gods if she absolutely needed it. Alternatively, a ward that suppressed all magic in the area should be able to achieve the same effect.

Seeing that Jadeite was about to continue his lesson, she picked up her pen, being once again grateful for her fabrication spell - also not an original creation, but an emulation of the room-constructing powers of the dungeon heart, as she now realised - and readied herself to continue taking notes.

"You won't need that," Jadeite said, head turned sideways to look at her as he walked slowly up and down the room with his hands behind his back, "I think it is time to check if you can put the material you have seen to use now."

Ami gulped. She hoped this practical part would be less dramatic than his demonstration of the consequences of incompetent

teleportation. Judging from the haughty expression on his face, he wasn't expecting her to do all that well. Her eyes flared with determination. She'd show him!

The girl kneeling in front of a blazing fire, her form hidden from the two other observers in the spacious room by the long black hair cascading to the ground, sucked in her breath as an image in the fire formed. Behind her, the gasp was mirrored by the blonde and the cat when they caught sight of the two familiar figures dancing in the flames.

"That's Ami! And Jadeite," Usagi blurted out, blue eyes wide open. "Oh no! Run away, Ami," she shouted when the dark general stepped toward the blue-haired girl, scowling. To her horror, the picture of her friend did no such thing. She didn't even shy away when Jadeite grabbed her wrist and pulled it slightly upward, adjusting how she was holding her hand. The pigtailed blonde was biting her fingernails by the time he stepped away, and Ami actually gave him a faint smile. She turned to the cat sitting to her right. "Luna, why isn't she fighting him?"

"He must have brainwashed her!" Luna worried, hair standing on end when when black sparks started swirling above the girl in the vision's hands. "This is bad! She knows who you are!"

"She wouldn't tell him," Usagi defended her friend. "She has been gone for weeks, and that new general hasn't come after us. You have to find a way to save her!" she demanded.

"I'm trying my best, but it's not easy even finding the Dark Kingdom," Luna sighed, her ears flat against her head and her tail twitching. "I wonder why she has a dark general training her personally."

"And here I hoped we had seen the last of Jadeite," Rei muttered, sweat trickling down her forehead from the effort required to maintain the vision.

"She still has the scary red eyes," the blonde pointed out as she scooted closer to the fire on her knees, "and is also better dressed

than him." The ensemble that the girl in the vision was wearing looked vaguely military, but was black, as opposed to the grey uniform the dark generals favoured. It also sported epaulettes with the Mercury sign on them, and was adorned with sinister gold patterns.

"Yes, that is strange. It doesn't make-" the black cat paused, having developed a horrible suspicion. "Rei, can you sense if something is possessing her?"

"Hey, who's that?" Usagi interrupted as a short, red-headed man walked toward the transparent Ami.

"Um, Mercury, sorry to intrude on your lesson, but someone is spying on us with magical means," Snyder said as he approached, having left his comfortable out-of-the-way spot near the wall to present the faintly-sparkling ward resting in his palm.

Ami stopped focusing on the control exercise, and the three transparent rings of crackling black power moving in a triangular pattern between her outstretched hands dissipated. She turned to look at the glyph-encrusted silvery coin in the acolyte's hand. "Is there a way to track whoever is doing it?" she asked, catching a crystal sphere that suddenly appeared out of thin air, and alternated between looking at Snyder and Jadeite expectantly.

"Um, you could ask the crystal ball for everyone who is able to see you right now," the acolyte said after a moment of thought.

"Thanks. The magic is smart enough to interpret complex orders like that?" Ami asked, already focused on the clear sphere. The orb in her hands glowed with white light. Jadeite took a step back, reminded too much of another female authority figure who was nearly never seen without a device like that.

Snyder shook his head. "No, I'm afraid that is not exactly how it works. Seeing something establishes an ephemeral, exploitable arcane link with it. Suffice it to say, you can use this to find out who is watching you, but not necessarily from where he is watching."

The interior of the milky sphere swirled while different, fractured pictures fought for dominance. Ami could discern the sandstone tones of the room she was in within two of them, and focused on one of the fainter ones instead. Immediately, she felt the drain on her magic surge, confirming that the origin of this perspective was far, far more remote. Under her stare, the picture peeling itself out of the haze slowly stabilised. Startled, Ami nearly dropped the crystal ball when she recognised the room as Rei's shrine and saw her friends sitting in front of the sacred fire, wherein a transparent picture of her holding the crystal ball, which was again showing the fire, flickered. She could see the beads of sweat glistening on the shrine maiden's brow, and felt a pang of homesickness at seeing Usagi discuss something with Luna.

As the surprise wore of, something occurred to Ami, and she whirled around, sprinting to the desk with notes, and scattered the stack of tightly-written papers all over the floor in her haste. With frantic speed, she started writing something in very large letters on a blank sheet, not caring that her penmanship suffered. When done, she quickly picked the message up and held it out very visibly in front of herself, then glanced back at the crystal ball. Her stomach sank when she saw that vision in the flames was gone, and Rei was sitting hunched-over on the ground, looking tired and massaging her temples while her eyes were closed. A moment later, she saw Usagi put a hand on the shrine maiden's shoulder, who scowled and barked a reply before looking up and narrowing her eyes, pulling out a prayer strip. Ami watched her go through the familiar motions of empowering it, and the reception in her crystal ball started to suffer. Seeing how pale and exhausted Rei looked, Ami decided to cut the connection, as it was unlikely that the black-haired girl would try another fire reading any time soon.

"Mercury? What happened?" Snyder asked, having been caught as unprepared by her sudden burst of activity as Jadeite.

Ami smiled brightly, feeling elated at the knowledge that Usagi, Rei, and Luna were still searching for her. "Those were my friends, from my world! They haven't given up on me yet!" A bit more sombrely, she added "Unfortunately, they stopped watching before I could finish my message. Snyder, can I please have such a warning

amulet?" she pointed at the now inert silver disc in the redhead's hand.

"Certainly. They are not difficult at all to craft with my considerable skills," the acolyte agreed.

Ami was nearly skipping as she sauntered back to the desk. She'd have to start carrying a pre-written message around. Or even better, a sign! No, instructions on when to do a fire reading and to bring writing tools. She would be able to talk with her friends again! She could ask them how they were doing, and leave a message for her mother! She- would have to explain Jadeite's presence, the young Keeper realised, coming down from her emotional high. And also why her eyes were glowing red. She hadn't missed the worried expressions the other senshi had been sporting when they had watched her through the sacred fire. This would have to be handled delicately.

Baron Leopold was strapping on his armour and feeling rather irritated at the monks and priests fussing over him. "I have told you, I am fine! If you want to be useful, help me with that buckle over there!"

"But my Lord," one of the golden and white dressed priests began, even as he struggled with the unfamiliar piece of armour, "you just escaped from a Keeper! Surely you must-"

"Bah, speak no more of it. She let me go, the little witch, hoping that I would deal with one of her rivals, no doubt. You are sure you have found no contamination or nasty magic hidden on my person, huh?" Metal clinked as surprisingly light plates snapped smoothly into place on the noble's shoulders.

"Yes, my Lord. Even if we had not, the bath in the sacred pool would have cleansed you of any dark trickery," the holy man confirmed.

"Excellent. Now-" he suddenly went very still and clenched his teeth, then searched his surroundings with a wild-eyed gaze.

"Excuse me? Baron Leopold, this is Sailor Mercury. Do not answer, I cannot hear you. This communication works one-way only."

The noble snorted, irritated at hearing the voice of the wicked Keeper resonate oddly in his head, like a faint dream. He ignored the inquiries of the people worried about his sudden stop, listening as the young girl - if that was her true form - continued.

Ami stood within her command centre, holding one of the giant eyestalks growing out of the ground, and speaking into the melon-sized eyeball as if it was a microphone. It was kind of gross, but not as gross as one hour ago, when she had impatiently tried to get her message to her friends across dimensions immediately. The device had overloaded and burst, drenching her with a cold, pus-like liquid. She had showered half an hour to get rid of the stink. The odd growths were, however, quite reliable when used for their intended purpose.

"I have found Arachne's lair, but it is well defended. I would advise you to scry it before attempting anything. Please bring a map of the relevant parts of your kingdom, as well as my minion, to an unwarded location, so that I can see the map through the minion's eyes. I will then be able to tell you where on the map you should mark down Arachne's dungeon. I will be checking back on the minion every hour so that we can get the timing right. Thanks in advance."

More Lessons

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Ami had had to check three times, once every hour, before the Baron decided to agree to her proposed method of completing the deal. Through the eyes of her minion, which were located somewhere within its squirming mess of dark green and black tentacles, she could see a map. Her lips curved upwards in faint amusement when she recognised the drawing as a copy of the greater map that the noble must have recovered from her abandoned first dungeon. The tentacle monster in question rested in a thick-barred cage, moving only sluggishly. Ami didn't know if this was normal, or if it was tired from whatever the priests had done to separate it from Boris. The loud, large, and hairy barbarian didn't seem to be around, which was just as well in her opinion. Through one of the windows of the room, part of a white marble cupola was visible, leading her to believe that the wooden shack her creature was stored in was located on temple ground, or at least close to it. Straw covered the floor, indicating that the building served as a stable most of the time. There were no horses around right now though, only the huge form of the Baron with his guards. He was in full armour, and the purple plume on his helmet jutted proudly, trying to out-do the protruding ends of his enormous moustache. He was currently glaring at the heap of bored pseudopods and tapping his foot impatiently.

"Baron Leopold? I am ready to begin our transaction. Simply leave my minion where it is right now please, and I will retrieve it once I have given you the location of Arachne's dungeon."

The armoured man started at the sudden intrusion of her voice, then stepped over to the map, his blue cape billowing behind him. With Ami's clear and concise instructions, he managed to place a pin on the correct location quickly, even if he was scowling throughout the process. Ami let go of the giant eyeball she had been using to communicate telepathically, and whose stalk felt cold and stringy in her hand. She hoped the Baron's honour would demand that he

uphold his end of the bargain - she couldn't really force him to. She did not have anything important to lose if he failed to, but would probably feel guilty if she didn't concoct a plan to rescue the strange tentacle creature. Sometimes, having a sense of responsibility was nothing but trouble.

The black-clad girl used her Keeper powers to transport herself into the sweltering heat of the desert above her dungeon. The region still looked as if burnt to fine, grey ash that swirled around the dunes. Her mental view returned to her captured minion. Aside from the Baron and his men now giving the monster's cage a wide berth, nothing had changed. Ami nodded to herself and wiped some sweat from her brow. If the Baron had prepared some sort of unpleasant surprise for her, then making sure it didn't arrive within the dungeon proper was well worth the discomfort of putting up with the scorching sun for a while. Ami took a wide-legged stance and started chanting the words of the summoning ritual that allowed her to draw a single person to her location, provided her target did not move from its position. In the sand, fiery lines formed a blue-burning circle, around which sand swirled as if caught in a dust devil. A few minutes of chanting later, a pillar of more naturally coloured flame shot into the air, distorting the sand in a blossom-like pattern, and the cage containing the wayward minion suddenly stood where the most intense fires had been.

"Keeper! I admit, I wasn't really expecting to see you again. You have my gratitude. You wouldn't believe how vexing it was to share a body with that loud, uncultured brute. He had no conversational skills to speak of, and the smell... um, would it be too much to let me out of these confining quarters?"

The tentacled minion certainly was talkative after his captivity, Ami noted with some relief. That probably meant it hadn't been mistreated. Her visor snapped into place, its surface gleaming in the sun as she turned it on what she had just drawn through space. The numbers on the readout seemed normal, as far as they could be for a slimy, multi-eyed bag of tentacles that had just been pulled magically across half a continent. She was pretty sure the life signs were as they should be, and that there was no foreign magic attached to her employee. "Welcome back," she finally said. "Go get

some rest after your ordeal." With that, she plucked the underling out of his cage and deposited him deep in the bowels of the dungeon. All this dry heat couldn't be good for a creature like that. She turned her gaze back on the metal cage, whose bottom was already disappearing under the shifting sands. Her eyes narrowed as she confirmed the readouts. While her creature had been clean, so to speak, its prison was not. The blue-haired girl could not identify the exact effect that the lingering magic trapped in the iron would evoke, but she was familiar enough with spells by now that she could recognise a transformation enchantment when she scanned one. Her head tilted forward and her hands balled into fists. Would it have been too much for the Baron to deal fairly with her, even if she was a Keeper? Obviously. Well, she could understand that being abducted did nothing to make him more favourably disposed toward her, but... eyes flashing, she looked back at the empty cage that gleamed mockingly in the light. "Jadeite!"

Cathy, dressed in a Sailor Mercury uniform she had improved by wearing trousers with lightly-plated legs, knocked on the door to the room that Mercury and Jadeite used for magic lessons.

"Enter," a slightly harried voice from within called.

Cautiously, the long-haired blonde pushed open the creaking door and peeked in through the gap. Just barging in was dangerous, as she had learned a while ago. The scorched ends of her hair could still attest to that. Her prudence paid off: from the left, Mercury rushed past, waving her arms up and down and staggering as if she was about to fall. Cathy winced in sympathy, fully expecting the girl to run head-first into the wall at the other end of the room. Instead, Ami disappeared. Her soft gasps alerted the watching swordswoman that the young Keeper had merely transported herself back to the left side of the room. Only on her second pass by the door, which was no more dignified than the first, did Cathy notice that the blue-haired girl's feet weren't touching the ground. On the third, the blonde valiantly grabbed Mercury's arm as she passed. Despite being heavier, she had to steady herself against the door frame when the sudden jerk threatened to topple her.

Ami let out a startled yelp when her forward momentum was suddenly cancelled. Floating horizontally in the air, she blinked owlishly at the blonde who was holding her outstretched hand."Thank you," she stammered after a moment.

Cathy let go, throwing a questioning gaze at the still floating girl. Ami tried to turn herself around so that she would have been lying on her belly if she was on the ground, but only managed to make herself spin around her own axis slowly. Grasping and flailing at the just out of reach floor and walls did nothing to help. Looking not unlike a kitten who had climbed on a tree and couldn't get down, Ami craned her head to look pointedly at Jadeite, who was snickering to himself at the sight.

"Jadeite, are you done with your lesson yet? Mercury needs to work on her combat skills," the swordswoman demanded.

The dark general grinned. "Does it look to you as if she has grasped what I am trying to teach her yet?"

Ami was making swimming motions in the air, but her efforts were barely even moving her forward. Sighing, she braved trying to control the spell once more, closed her eyes in concentration, and then suddenly shot backward, slamming into the right wall with her feet first. She let out a grunt at the impact, but at least now she had something solid she could walk on. Even if it was a wall. Moving was still awkward, as gravity still had a partial hold on her, which her hanging hair attested to.

"You know, most youma get this on the first try," Jadeite jeered from his corner.

"Did they have *you* as a teacher?" Cathy shot back acidly. "Come on, cancel that spell. We don't have all day, and she needs that training, scrawny as she is."

"Don't I get any say in this?" Ami complained. She was currently looking at the chequerboard-patterned tiles of the floor from a distance less than an arm's length away, and didn't particularly look forward to the opportunity to introduce her face to them.

"Fine, turn off the spell when you want to," the curly-haired general allowed magnanimously, before disappearing, leaving only a few rapidly fading vertical lines in the form of his silhouette behind.

"Well?" Cathy asked, turning back to Ami, who was cautiously fumbling her way further down the wall with her legs, trying to re-achieve verticality.

"Sorry, I'm still working on that," the blue-haired girl informed her self-appointed trainer, "that would have been the next lesson. Wait, I think I have it- oh, for crying out loud!"

Cathy looked up at the young Keeper, who was now nursing a bump on her head and hovering just below the ceiling. "I'll go get a rope."

Ami ran along the track, panting and face flush with exertion. She didn't think of herself as out of shape, but had to admit that, aside from a few short burst of frantic violence, she hadn't gotten much exercise these last few weeks, and most of that not even in her own body. In any case, her legs felt leaden, her throat was dry, and her muscles burned. The cloth of her sweat-soaked T-shirt clung to her back, in stark contrast to the comparatively immaculate senshi uniform that Cathy was wearing. The blonde was running easily at Ami's side, still looking disgustingly fresh as their footsteps echoed through the hall. At least, nobody else was watching this, because the blue-haired girl had made use of her Keeper's prerogative and evicted everyone else from the training hall while she was using it.

"Enough for the warmup," Cathy decided.

Gratefully, Ami sat down on the low wall surrounding the rectangular arena at the centre of the room, and took a few deep breaths. She looked down at her slender legs, which protruded from the white shorts she had created for the occasion. Bending forward, she put her palms on the skin over her calves. Green necromantic light flared from the seam between hand and skin as she tended to the the sore muscles.

"Better?" the tall swordswoman asked, doing some stretches. At

Ami's positive answer, the blonde's lips split into a shark-like smile. "Good! If you can fix yourself right up afterwards, that means I don't have to go too easy on you!"

Ami gulped. This was going to be a looooong lesson.

"Oh, cheer up. At least you are getting a weapon this time around. What do you prefer? Swords? Spears? I don't think a mace would work well against the Reaper, you'll need more reach..."

A black, two-dimensional ellipse opened in the air of Ami's living room, causing Cathy, who was reclining in a comfortable armchair, to look up in alarm. A curly-haired blond head poked through, followed by the rest of Jadeite. While the dark general floated gently to the floor, another head, this one crowned with brown and wavy hair, poked through cautiously, as if not entirely trusting this mode of transportation.

"I don't have all day, Jered. Get in here," the grey-uniformed man ordered, and his reluctant companion pulled himself through the hole in space, sliding down from the lower edge and letting himself drop to the floor.

"Jadeite, you figured out how to properly open portals between here and the Underworld without flooding the place with lava? Great," a voice from the right murmured, sounding too tired to put much enthusiasm into the praise.

"Cathy, you realise that we need Mercury alive if she is to win that duel, right?" Jered said with a wink when he turned toward the source and spotted the blue-haired girl sprawled out on a couch with her eyes closed, sporting fading bruises on what little skin he could see. She had a book, but it was lying unopened on her belly.

"She's just horribly out of shape," the scar-faced woman replied, not even looking up from the cup of tea she was sipping, "nothing that some exercise won't fix. She'll get enough of that during our fighting lessons, which she is in dire need of."

Ami opened one eye, which swivelled tiredly in the direction of the speaker. "I much prefer swimming," she groaned.

"Swimming won't help you survive the Reaper," Cathy remarked.

"On that note, I managed to get some more information on how these Azzathra duels usually take place," Jered said and sat down on the armrest of Cathy's armchair. "The armour plan is definitely an option." Seeing that he had Mercury's attention - her other eye had opened too - he continued "The fights in Azzathra's honour take place with equipment that both combatants brought themselves. However, if they enhance their wearer magically, this enhancement is shared. There was a fight between two dark knights, or so I have heard, where one of them brought a ring that made him invisible. As soon as he used it, his opponent disappeared from sight, too."

"I'm sure the audience was pleased," Cathy commented.

"Well, they started tossing foul eggs and rotting tomatoes until both combatants were so splattered that they were visible again," Jered said with a shrug. "Also, absolutely don't try to fight in a possessed body. There's a story about a warlock who was forced to enter this contest, and he tried to show up while possessing a bile demon. Azzathra yanked him right out and tossed him into the arena as a disembodied spirit that promptly expired. Shortest duel in their history."

Ami's mouth went round with surprise. "Oh."

"As for procedure, once you state that you are ready for the duel, an orange mark consisting of a disc and a surrounding circle will appear on the back of your left hand. The circle is going to open and disappear slowly, like sand trickling down a hourglass. This gives the priesthood a few days to prepare an arena and get out word of the event. The moment the last bit of circle disappears, you will be moved to the arena, with all the equipment you currently have on you." The lanky man continued "Weapons, well. Ranged weapons just don't show up at all, unless they are multi-purpose, like a throwing dagger. The restraints on magical enhancements are a bit less strict there. If it enhances physical prowess, it's still copied over to the enemy. If it's just deadlier, it's not. The theological justification

for that is that a superior fighter will just be able to take the enemy's weapon away and beat him with it."

"What if the magical weapon casts spells?" Jadeite asked, trying to contribute.

"If it hits, the user suffers the same effect so the tougher fighter wins," Jered commented. "Oh, and there's another tactic we have to scratch. In one fight, a captured elderly hero wizard developed a spell to turn himself into an exact replica of himself so that the duplication effect would bring his heavily-armoured opponent down to his level. Azzathra was furious and turned his opponent back into his true form, then copied him, thus turning the fight even more one-sided than it previously was."

The girl on the couch paled. She had been planning something along those lines.

"It seems that anything to make your opponent weaker or yourself stronger will be negated," Jadeite analysed the situation. "However, it also seems that this so-called dark god doesn't know in advance what a certain magical effect will do. Maybe we can exploit that."

"What did you have in mind?" Cathy asked, interested.

Jadeite had always liked being the centre of attention, even if the current setting, especially the way his current employer's head lolled to the side so she could look at him, lacked the dignity of Beryl's court. "I propose an upgrade to the self-animated armour plan. Put an enchantment on it that weakens yourself slightly. It will still look as if you were faster and stronger when you control the suit, and the Reaper will get the copied debilitating spell."

"Risky," Jered commented, "but it would probably raise more eyebrows if there was no enchantment affecting Mercury on her armour which is so obviously making her stronger."

"The armour I still don't know how to create," Ami sighed sullenly.

"Well, your warlocks are currently trying to figure out how an animated skeleton works, using your recordings. That should at

least give you a starting point," Cathy comforted her.

"After which I'll still have to apply it to a suit of armour, strengthen it a lot, and make it work with mental control," the short-haired girl pointed out. Oh well, she would deal with that after a nap.

The door opened, and Snyder rushed in, slamming it behind him and leaning against the wood with his back. The acolyte's bowl cut was a mess, and his normally immaculate white robe with red stole and collar hung askew and dishevelled on his short and portly frame. "Mercury," he nearly squeaked.

Ami opened her eyes again unwillingly, taking in the acolyte's agitated state. "Yes?"

The redhead straightened. "Mercury, please do control your minions. These, these... such an undignified ... " he stuttered, reaching for words.

"What happened?"

"Your... employees, these women, the black-leather clad ones. They state that they are bored, and that I would make a great 'pet project'." He shuddered while his cheeks coloured. "They, they are trying to *corrupt* me!"

"Well, you could stand to loosen up a bi- Ouch!" Jered rubbed his side, where the steel-like elbow of his girlfriend had jabbed him.

"Thanks, but no thanks. For your information, I have no ambition to acquaint myself with sharp claws, whips, and hot pokers. Please do something, Mercury!"

Ami wanted nothing more than to take a nap, but the imploring tone of voice of the adventurer told her that this was something that would brook no delay. And the young man hadn't really asked anything of her before so... but she really didn't want to get up! Maybe she could put this morning's magic lesson to good use?

Loud moans, shrill shrieks of pain, and meaty smacking sounds

formed the acoustic backdrop to the scene Ami dropped in on. One of the quartet looked up at the floating form just lying in the air, using her arms as a pillow, and purred "Oh, Keeper. Are you hear to join us? This looks like it has so much kinky potential!"

Ami turned her head away so fast that she nearly gave herself whiplash, blushing to the roots. "Ulp. NO! I'm just here to tell you to leave Snyder alone, and," a wet cutting noise, followed by an ecstatic thrill, nearly drove the bile to her throat. "Could you stop that while I'm talking to you? And put some clothes on!"

Discontent muttering accompanied her command, but she heard some rustling and sliding behind her while she kept her gaze firmly fixed on a spider web in the upper corner of the room. "Aww, but it's so boring. The horned reaper is useless if we can't touch him." Two more voices made what sounded like affirmative noises through their gags. "We should really find a more fun dungeon," the first speaker added.

"I- well, I might have something else to do for you," Ami admitted. "I need the Reaper to fatten up. Do you think you can get him to eat a lot, even if he doesn't want to?"

"What a strange request," one of the women said, eyeing the floating girl speculatively. Ami could nearly read the odd conclusions she was leaping to from her eyes. The young Keeper felt her cheeks get hotter at the sound of the leather corset squeaking under the strain when the provocatively-dressed lady breathed in. "Interesting, though." Her tone became throatier. "Don't worry, we'll have him eating out of our hands in no time!"

"Um, well, I'll leave it to you then," Ami replied, before transporting herself away to her room and cancelling her spell over her bed. She dropped like a rock, sinking deeply into the soft covers, and didn't even move to get into a more comfortable position. What a day. If Jadeite was a demanding teacher and a bit of a jerk who was amused by seeing her struggle, then Cathy was a slave driver. Despite the healing spells, she was still feeling sore in muscles she had formerly only known the name of. As she drifted closer to sleep, she thought back to the tentacle monster, and its cage. Jadeite had gotten rid of it for her, good. As far as super-powered minions went,

he was a real improvement over the Reaper. More flexible power set, better temper. Yawn. Much more handsome, too. Her dreams claimed her a moment later, never once realising what she had thought.

"It will have turned back by now, your Lordship," a blue-clad wizard with a pointy hat and a long white beard stated authoritatively, looking at a structure that resembled a canopy tent, except that it was made of stone and rested on four thick, round pillars. Within the structure wavered a water-like surface, forming an upright oval that looked like a full-length mirror.

A man in light leather armour poked with a long stick at it, which went through the ellipse with no resistance, but did not emerge on the other side. He moved the pole around several ways before pulling it out, apparently satisfied with the result. A low bow brought his face close, then through the portal. He pulled it back. "It is safe. Dark, but no guards!"

Baron Leopold walked around the construct with clattering footsteps, then swivelled around on his heel to address the lines of troops assembled in the courtyard. "You heard him, men! We'll sneak up on that insolent Keeper before she knows we are there, bypassing her traps. Tonight, there will be one less of these monsters!"

Abbot Durval stepped up to his side and stretched so he could whisper in the taller man's ear. Leopold lowered the arm he had raised in pre-emptive cheer, his face falling. "Oh, and as the good Abbot just reminded me, the Light, for some unfathomable reason, wants that Keeper to be taken alive in the improbable case that she should surrender. Whatever! To victory!" He was the first one to charge through the wavering portal. Once on the other side, he stepped aside to let his men through, who entered more orderly in rows of three. With great discipline, the soldiers fanned out, securing all directions and illuminating the dust and spider-web covered place with their torches. After them came the magic users, remaining within the secured perimeter.

"This place is a mess. Typical Underworlder filth," one of the soldiers

whispered, looking around and finding untidy stacks of crates and chests.

"Ew, and the smell. Don't they clean here, ever?"

"Well, what do you expect of such scum?"

With each word, the Baron's right eyebrow twitched some more. "Wizard," he growled out through clenched teeth as he rounded upon the gangly man who was scratching his beard, "Why is the other end of the hero gate in my attic, huh?"

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Choice of Weapons

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Chains clinked and rattled as the Reaper tore at them to no avail. The heavy metal bands attached to his wrists and ankles kept the red-skinned demon suspended and spread-eagled against the wall, despite the best efforts of his bulging muscles. Ami didn't think that he would manage to ever break the chain-links that were as thick as her arm, even if he displayed every intention to. His massive hooves hammered against the wall hard enough to send vibrations through the stonework that she could feel even from ten metres away. In one corner of his cell, a pile of chicken bones folded in on itself while the demon raged against his restraints. Spittle sprayed from the monster's fanged mouth as he bellowed, yellow eyes blazing bright with unholy fury.

Ami kept staring at him through her visor, typing away at her keyboard, looking for anything that she could use in a fight against him. Know the enemy. Her findings so far were not encouraging. The reaper, was if one included his long, straight horns, nearly twice as tall as she was, but massed over eight times more, most of which was muscle. Despite the bulk, she knew from her confrontations with him that he could move at least as fast as she could in senshi form. Considering his strength, even fattening him up would not do much to slow him down, but it might interfere with his coordination and flexibility, especially if she didn't give him any opportunity to get used to the new weight distribution before the battle. A whitish cloud of plaster rained from the ceiling, making her wonder if her plan would even work if he kept burning off all that excess food with his struggles. For the moment, she was not so interested in his physical prowess though. He had been tracking her unerringly during their last fight, and she wanted to know how. That he was still capable of it she knew, because he had started screaming profanities at her the moment she had appeared within these deep vaults, far out of his line of sight.

More diagrams appeared on her screen, surrounded by a cloud of

mathematical symbols and formulas. Below all the different colours, the silhouette of the Reaper could barely be made out. Still nothing that would explain his ability. Maybe if she focused on the eyes? No, unlikely. The sense had nothing to do with vision. Some external magical effect, maybe? Ami adjusted a few parameters, and the outline of the demon dimmed, while his surroundings lit up. There was a connection from the beast to her dungeon heart, which was expected. She had 'ownership' of him, as far as the dungeon heart was concerned, because he was her prisoner. That would change the moment he got free, unfortunately, but for the moment, it meant that she could affect him with her Keeper powers just like one of her regular minions.

Ami frowned. She had been about to filter the output so it only showed incoming effects - maybe the dark gods were feeding the Reaper the information directly - when she noted something odd. Her fingers flew over the buttons, striking them at a breakneck pace. The image of the normally invisible link between prisoner and dungeon heart grew until it filled the whole screen, and then disappeared completely. Or at least that *should* have happened when Ami filtered it out. However, something remained, something that shouldn't have been there. The senshi pondered the second connection she was seeing. It was extremely faint compared to a regular one, and its outline was frayed, but it looked somewhat like a minion bond. The computer had coloured the energy coursing through the line with black, very different from the aquamarine she had come to associate with her own magic. The basic pattern of the connection seemed to be the same, though. Ami examined the brilliant torrent that was her own link to the dungeon heart, and made the same discovery. The unknown thread was hiding within the much stronger link that eclipsed it. With a short examination of an imp, Ami confirmed that the foreign magic did not affect anyone else, and furrowed her brows.

With a likely enabler for the Reaper's new ability to focus on, the genius girl's investigation came to the comforting conclusion that the link was not one that had been imposed on her externally. In fact, it was the one that the horned demon had severed so one-sidedly. She had never properly fired him, which must have given the dark gods an opportunity to reconnect him to the fraying end still dangling

somewhere in metaphysical space. Whether they had been able to do so because contact with the Light had temporarily burnt out her Keeper powers or not, she couldn't decide. Bar them telling her, she would never know. Unless they did it again. With a bitter smile, Ami excised the connection, and watched on her visor as it shrivelled in an instant, retreating from her toward the dungeon heart like a fuse that had been set on fire.

Registering a change in the background noise level, she looked back up to the Reaper hanging from his manacles. He was holding still for now, and his mouth was moving, making his nose ring dance up and down.

"Excuse me, I didn't catch that?" Ami asked, plucking out her earplugs, which prompted an annoyed growl from the creature.

"I said, 'what did you do'?" the chained beast growled with barely-restrained fury.

"Something I would have done earlier if I had known about it," the blue-haired girl answered, sounding distracted. Good, nothing seemed to remain of the foreign magic. She just hoped it would remain that way. While potentially useful, the connection had been a liability. And she didn't think that Azzathra would look favourably on her sucking out the Reaper's life energy through it. With the duplication effect in place, she would run out long before him, and the monster was dangerous enough when he didn't know exactly where she was at all times.

"...bribes are not going to work! What do you take me for, a dog to be swayed with treats? Hey! Come back here!"

This time, Ami wasn't alone with Cathy in the training hall. Jered and Snyder were sitting on the central arena's surrounding wall, and even Jadeite was leaning against one of the training dummies. It was more of a strategy meeting than an exercise session this time, the blue haired girl thought.

"All right, we need to find the best weapon for Mercury to use in her

duel. We don't have much time to get her passably proficient at several, so we need to keep the goal of Reaper-killing firmly in mind," the swordswoman began, walking past a rack on which blades and long-hafted weapons of different kinds gleamed. "Normally, if I wanted a complete beginner to become dangerous fast, I would recommend a spear. It doesn't get any simpler than jabbing the pointy end into an enemy from a distance, and simple is good. However," she paused, putting the weapon back in its place, "in the Reaper's case, he would still have the range advantage with his longer arms and scythe."

"I would also like to mention that even a solid hit would not necessarily put the demon out of action," Snyder added, standing up and walking over to the life-size diagrams of the enemy on the wall, stopping at the one that showed the organs. He started moving his index finger around as he pointed out various locations. "In my opinion, it would take a direct stab to the heart or to the brain to kill him quickly enough. Any other location, and you just have your weapon stuck in a place where it does not do much good."

"That's debatable," Jadeite commented, "With the right enhancements on the spearhead, a single wound could be enough to take him out of action."

"There are limits on how much power can be crammed into a single weapon," Jered said, "whatever the enchantment is, it had better work fast enough that he can't grab a hold of the weapon while it is stuck in his flesh and disarm her. In any case, the optimal range for a spear is also the optimal range for his scythe. That alone makes it a bad idea."

Ami nodded. "I have little to add to that."

"Blunt weapons are right out, of course," Cathy continued, letting a warhammer whoosh through the air a few times. "Not only do they require long swings, they are mainly meant for piercing armour, which the Reaper doesn't use. While a good hit to the head can stun even a strong opponent, Mercury doesn't have the reach for it."

"I hit him in the head with an iron bar once," Ami interrupted, "it did nothing."

The swordswoman nodded in acknowledgement. "Besides, with all the weight located in the top, they are poor for parrying with. Axes suffer from similar problems." This time, she didn't even bother to pick up a few of the wide-bladed implements.

"Well, they can also be thrown," Snyder pointed out.

"That's true, but we don't exactly have anyone here who could teach me how to properly fight with an axe, do we?" Ami asked, being reminded of Boris. The large fighter had not seemed too concerned with defence, which was suicidal against a horned reaper. With a shudder, she looked back at the blonde.

Snyder wasn't done though. "Speaking of defence, or lack thereof, what about shields? Should she use a one-handed weapon and a shield, or should she go with a two-hander for greater capability to injure the demon?"

"A shield is a no-go. A blocked, rather than deflected, blow would send her flying or shatter her bones," Cathy rejected that possibility. "Besides, we should probably make a list of available trainers before we continue. Myself, I'm best with swords, but am also trained with polearms and blunt weapons."

Jered raised his hand. "Daggers and throwing weapons here, though I'd not go so far as to call my training in them *formal*."

"Well, I have some rudimentary skill with a staff, though I am hardly qualified to teach. However, some of the other minions may have other instruction to offer. I believe the women in particular are frighteningly skilled with bladed gauntlets and whips," Snyder fidgeted, his cheeks colouring at the memory.

Ami watched all heads turn to the last advisor who had not spoken yet. Jadeite shook his head. "I don't *need* weapons. However, I am familiar with using swords, should the 'commander' not be up to the task of teaching you."

"Right." Cathy stepped away from the weapon rack and considered. "I don't see a whip inflicting nearly enough damage to serve as anything than a choice for a secondary weapon, and they are

notoriously difficult to use properly. Bladed gauntlets don't offer any real advantage over daggers, and are less flexible. I think that leaves us with only swords and daggers as the remaining options."

Ami looked at the gleaming weapons still lying on the rack, comparing them with the illustrations of the Reaper. Compared to his size, they looked like toothpicks. The thought of fighting the creature with something like that was terrifying.

"Swords or daggers, but which one?" Snyder asked.

"They are not too different, aside from the throwing part," Jered said, patting the bandoleer on his chest. "I can use a shortsword if the situation requires it, but I much prefer staying back and slinging my daggers at targets of opportunity."

"So would I," Ami sighed, "but I won't have that option."

"Ahem, I think daggers might run into trouble stabbing deeply enough through muscle tissue to reach the Reaper's internal organs," Snyder objected, referencing the anatomy charts that Ami had produced from her scanned data.

"That can be worked around with magic," Jered said, "the greater problem, in my opinion, is the lack of reach. The most vulnerable spots of the Reaper are his neck and eyes, and she'd be hard-pressed to reach them with a short weapon like that. However, daggers would be better at fighting while staying too close for him to use his scythe, as the Baron suggested."

"Swords allow for better reach and more cutting power, though" the swordwoman defended her favoured weapon. "Besides, daggers provide practically no defence at all. With a good sword, you can deflect a blow. Though I'd advise dodging when fighting that thing."

"Ahem. Couldn't she use daggers to strike at weak points closer to the skin, like sinews, and cripple her opponent?" the acolyte was still looking at the charts and trying to find an easy way to bring the monster down.

"Yup," the long-haired blonde replied sarcastically. "Because hitting

a specific spot on a fast-moving target that's doing its best to kill you is the easiest thing in the world. I bet even Mercury could do it."

"Be nice," Jered chided disapprovingly upon seeing the look on the blue-haired girl's face. "I know for a fact that some archers are very fond of enchantments that guide their arrows precisely into the intended target."

"Something to keep in mind," Jadeite said. "So far, I'm most in favour of the sword. Enchant the daggers to seek out a target and keep them as a backup weapon, if you like. Fighting with a weapon that can't significantly hurt the enemy without striking a weak spot is just stupid."

"I think I agree with that," Ami said, "I'll probably be too busy staying alive to properly aim my blows."

"It's workable," Jered admitted, "have the sword for offence, and keep some daggers around as a ranged weapon."

Ami thought that she would much prefer having a gun with a bayonet affixed as a ranged weapon, but she doubted that the bullets would arrive with her. On the other hand, she did have a fabrication spell. She should probably put some more thought into this. "What kind of sword though? I heard that rapiers are quick and good for fighting unarmoured opponents."

"If you are fighting humans maybe. They'll usually stop coming at you if you puncture them. It's the same basic principle as a spear. Have more range than your opponent and stab them before they get to you. Not going to work here," Cathy objected. "I'd say a two-handed sword. You may look as if a stiff breeze could blow you over, but you are strong enough to wield it one-handed if necessary. I know I am with these enchantments," the woman said, and promptly demonstrated this by grabbing one of the large weapons by the handle and whirling it around. Snyder ducked his head at hearing the sharp metal whistle through the air.

"Not the best weapon for close-in fighting, though, and won't the weight slow her down?" Cathy's wavy-haired boyfriend seemed less than enthused by the idea.

"With it, she has enough range to stay out of his arm's reach, but is still close enough to make scythe strikes impractical. She can use the dagger in her off-hand if she closes in further. The Reaper is large enough that something will always be at optimal sword distance, too. Besides, it's not *that* much heavier than a one-handed sword, and will force her opponent to remain more on the defence," the swordswoman answered. "What I'm most worried about is her getting past the Reaper's weapon in the first place. He's just too big. That's a problem that will persist with any weapon, though."

"I expect that she will be able to teleport herself past his guard by then," Jadeite commented, uncrossing his arms. "Despite appearances, she is actually progressing very well in what I am teaching her."

Ami blushed faintly at the praise and lowered her head. "Really? But, don't you think that teleporting will be on the list of discouraged magic?"

"I can't imagine that Azzathra will have a problem with you using it to get closer to your opponent," the dark general guessed. "Even, if it's duplicated, the Reaper will just maintain his original distance, and there's nothing lost."

"What about flight?" Cathy asked. "She was floating yesterday, and not very gracefully. It looks like controlling that is an acquired skill."

Jadeite smirked. "Well, that depends on how much progress she makes. The spell she used is an enchantment, but I have no idea what the dark god would make of it when it turns out that it is something beneficial, but only if you are trained in it. My way to levitate is more advanced and more like an innate power, but currently beyond her skills."

"I see. Our tactics had better not rely on it, then."

"Mercury, what do you think about all this? You will have to learn how to use the weapons, so if you have any suggestions or objections, tell us now." Jered encouraged.

Ami had her reservations about swords, or, more precisely, about

using them to hack apart and mutilate a body. The thought sickened her, but she could see that she probably would have to go along with it anyway. "I'll do my best, but I'll also keep looking for a way to avoid this duel altogether. If I could just find out how to block the dark god's access, then I wouldn't have to worry about the choice of dying slowly but certainly from their disease, or only probably dying from the Reaper." The problem was the spark of life, the gift from the dark gods that was the final component required to complete a dungeon heart and turn it into something more than just its base materials, something alive. She had the suspicion that this was the entrance point for their power, but knew nothing about it. Her hope rested with the ice ship even now on its way to the Avatar Isles, where an answer might be found. She looked up, eyes flashing red, and said something that her friends would have been very surprised to hear. "In any case, I intend to cheat as much as I can get away with!"

"What do you have in mind?" Jered asked, interested.

"Science," she answered simply. "There are some surprising things that can be done without magic, and which wouldn't be duplicated. Like, hmm, let's see..." Ami decided to do something suitably spectacular. An imp dropped out of thin air and landed amidst the gathering, looking up at their faces quizzically. It squeaked in alarm when bars of metal grew from the ground around it, enclosing it in a spherical cage. It started blinking worriedly in the blue-haired girl's direction when a thick tome fell into her hand and opened to a bookmark. "Step back from the cage, please. It is non-magical, except for having been conjured." Ami glanced at the pages before her, then extended her right hand toward the trapped creature, whose large black eyes went wide in terror. She muttered a two-word incantation, and blinding lightning arced from the pointing fingers toward the greenish-brown target. The smell of ozone permeated the hall, and the others blinked to clear the spots dancing before their eyes. "As you can see, the imp is unharmed," the senshi smiled brightly. The cowering imp in question opened its eyes, made a disbelieving noise, and started patting itself up and down to see if everything was still attached.

"... and you say that's done with no magic?" Jered asked, somewhat

paler than before, and stared in wonder at the undamaged construction, while the healthy imp inside rattled the bars. Only Jadeite seemed unimpressed, probably already familiar with the concept of a Faraday cage.

Ami nodded enthusiastically. "No magic, just simple physics. If properly incorporated into the armour, I could probably give the Reaper a nasty shock while remaining unharmed by the duplication. And I'm confident that I can come up with a few more tricks like that!"

"Well, that's a good start," Cathy nodded. "But we have no time to waste, so catch!"

Something long and wooden tumbled through the air toward Ami, who grasped it reflexively, noting that the object was a large training sword. With a sinking feeling, she looked at the grin threatening to split Cathy's face. Why did the otherwise nice woman have to be so energetic when it came to violence? Resignedly, she nodded. "Good. Jadeite, you know how to open portals from the Underworld to this one now, right? I think Arachne's dungeon would look a lot better with some magma in it. Jered, could you please go to the command centre and coordinate that with him? Snyder, can you brush up on your healing magic? I fear I am going to need it," she finished with a look down at her wooden weapon.

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Time Flies

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Breakfast with all of her advisers had become something of a tradition for Ami, if traditions could be developed in the space of a week. Noticing that Jadeite, who was sitting across the table from her, had winced while chewing, she put down her own sandwich in concern. "Do the burns still give you trouble?"

"No, I already told you I wasn't hurt badly. You did check for yourself," the curly-haired blond replied after swallowing. His tone left little doubt that he was uninterested in the direction the conversation was going.

Ami suspected he just didn't want to be poked and prodded at again. "But there could still be traces of cooled ash stuck under your skin," she continued, leaning forward. "You are very important for our success, so you need to take care of yourself!"

Jadeite suppressed a sigh as he looked into the worried, wide eyes of the girl. At the right side of the table, he could see Jered's weasel-like features twist in pain when one of his whispers earned him a quick jab to the ribs by his girlfriend, who was sitting next to him. But Mercury was still waiting for an answer. Why was she making such a fuss, anyway? He was fine. Sure, it had come as a nasty surprise when Arachne had sent a bolt of lightning through the portal he was using to funnel lava from the Underworld into her spider nurseries, but the resulting spray of steam and molten stone droplets had merely been painful, not life-threatening to one such as him. Besides, she had healed him up already. This caring approach was quite different from anything Beryl would have done, and honestly quite unsettling in its own way. His former queen would probably have punished him for the perceived failure, never mind that he had, over the past few days, torched most of the webs in the enemy Keeper's dungeon, catching almost all of her minions in the conflagration. He had also melted her portal, set the remaining cocoons on fire, and poured some liquid magma onto the hill-sized

spider guarding the entrance. Watching the flaming beast take off with an ear-splitting shriek and mow down everything in its path until it succumbed to the flames had been quite amusing. To summarise, he had pretty much left the enemy dungeon a smoking, hollowed out shell of its former self, even if he couldn't strike at the dungeon heart directly. But would Beryl have taken that into account? No, she would have focused on the one failure where the wraith-like form of the enemy Keeper had been near the opening portal by sheer bad luck, giving her the opportunity to retaliate. And then, the red-haired brat would probably have demanded that he find a way to maintain a portal for more than a few seconds, despite knowing what a strain that caused. Deciding that going with the truth would cause the least trouble in the long run, he said "If you must know, I bit my tongue."

"Now, how is the rest of your armour project coming along, Mercury?" Snyder asked, taking advantage of the muted snickers at Jadeite's expense. "My own contribution is proceeding quite nicely, but if you want the mana batteries smaller, you will not manage without using more expensive components."

Ami was successfully distracted by the inquiry. "Oh, the warlocks think they have mostly figured out how the skeletons use some laws of correspondence to move the bones that were once parts of their bodies. The most difficult problem that remains, for now, is copying that to an assembly of objects that weren't part of a greater whole before. Using an imp as central control won't work this time around, unfortunately, because I must be personally in control of the armour at all times if I don't want to be injured by it moving when I'm not completely ready yet. But we are already investigating some options."

"You have been busy, then," Jered commented. "We are still mapping the Avatar islands remotely via the crystal balls, but we haven't been able to locate an active hero dungeon heart yet. If some remain, they are bound to be well hidden."

Ami nodded at his report, looking not particularly discouraged. "Thanks, I expected that. I hope that I will be more successful once the dungeon heart arrives and I can go over there and use my scanner." There was nothing stopping her from transporting herself across the ocean and going there right now, but finding out how to

create new dungeon hearts was less urgent than preparing to survive her duel, all things considered. Then again, if it could provide her with a way to lock out the dark gods' influence, then she wouldn't even have to fight. Deep in thought, Ami washed down her food with a glass of water, contemplating the issue.

Ami jogged past marble and amethyst pillars on her way down to the training hall. Small grains of sand, carried by careless feet out of the arena within the chamber, gritted beneath her feet. A broad-nosed troll gave her an odd glance as she passed, but inclined his head respectfully and stepped out of the way. *Probably wondering why I'm not just teleporting,* the girl thought, noting in satisfaction that her heart was not beating much faster from the exertion. Not any more. After changing in her room into more appropriate clothes for exercising, running the short distance to the training area was a good warm-up. She paused at the high, wooden door, already smelling the ever-present stench of sweat, straw, and sand coming from the room behind it. Her face fell when she remembered that now came the least pleasant part of the day. The high point of her daily schedule, the magic lessons with Jadeite, were already over, and what was left was a reasonable approximation of physical education. Where the former resembled a mixture of strange mathematics and physics lessons, with some meditation and focusing exercises thrown in for good measure, what was about to come felt more like a particularly strenuous form of getting herself beaten up by Cathy. Granted, it was very educational and provided a great incentive to learn quickly, but Ami had never been very interested in sports, aside from swimming. Out of necessity, she had learned how to duck, evade, and deflect the swordswoman's blows most of the time, but just 'most' would not cut it against the Reaper. Still, she'd much rather be back with Jadeite. On the way here, a few questions about the course had come to her mind that he could explain to her, for example how to properly modulate-

"...hello, I'm talking to you!" an impatient, female voice intruded.

Ami's eyes focused on the hand waving just in front of her face, then followed it back over the elbow gloves up to where the arm disappeared beneath the material of a sailor senshi outfit. Cathy was

standing in the door, which had swung inwards without the blue-haired girl noticing it.

"Pleasant daydreams?" the blonde asked with a huge grin that boded poorly for Ami's immediate future.

Words of protest died unsaid before crossing the senshi's lips when the taller woman dragged her into the larger room by her wrist.

"I have thought up something special for today, to better prepare you for fighting an opponent of the Reaper's physical ability. I can't wait to see how it will work out!"

Ami gulped, watching the other woman ignore the wooden training weapons leaning against the wall. She looked past the curvy silhouette of her teacher to the back of the room, where currently unused training dummies and practice targets stood. The regular ones were bad enough, with their rotating arms and dangling, spiky balls on chains. The girl felt a chill at the thought of how Cathy could have modified them to simulate the Reaper more accurately. However, a cursory inspection of the devices did not reveal anything that promised impending doom. Instead, the blonde was walking toward the stone-ringed sand pit that served as a combat arena, located in the centre of the room.

"Don't you need your sword?" Ami asked, plodding after the woman and adjusting the sweatband in her hair.

"No, but you will need yours. Get down there!" Cathy ordered, pointing at the uneven sand.

Shrugging, Ami jumped over the wall and into the blood-stained pit. Her strong legs and the yielding sand easily cushioned the two and a half metre drop, and with a thought, the senshi summoned her weapon from the rack while she rose from her crouch. The wooden sword that appeared in her hands was nearly as tall as she was, but thanks to her enhancements she could easily use it in either hand, just as Cathy had predicted. Ami raised her head, throwing a questioning glance at the blonde, whose lower body was hidden by the wall at this angle.

"Good! Get ready! And remember to watch your technique!" the swordswoman rapidly turned a crank, causing a chain to rattle and go taut. A loudly creaking, rarely-used wooden portcullis rose, revealing Ami's opponent in the alcove behind it. Which, in hindsight, told her that she probably wouldn't have gotten down here if she had known what to expect.

"You have got to be kidding!" Ami shouted, taking a step back and shooting an incredulous look at the blonde, who was crossing her arms and smirking. At that moment, she reminded the teenager down in the pit very much of a certain dark general, before he had come to work for her.

"Nope! This will be the perfect training for what you need! Hey you, sic her!" At the woman's words, the dragon, who had lowered his head to fit into the cramped space, rose from his seating position, put his forelegs forward into the sand, and stretched like a cat. His long, serpentine tail waved behind him, throwing sparks as it scraped over the bricks constituting the walls. Then, the lizard-shaped warrior humped his back and smacked his lips while looking straight at Ami from slitted pupils. A moment later, his finger-long claws sank deep into the sand as he emerged from his abode with confident, prancing steps that looked as if he was walking on tiptoes.

Ami backed away. Her dragon was young and small, as dragons went, but that was little comfort to her. He was still big enough to tower over the Reaper, and that was just height! Add to that a body the size of a medium elephant, plus that length again in scaly tail, and you had something that made the wooden replica two-hander she was gripping look positively inadequate. The teenage girl turned back to Cathy with a wide-eyed, imploring look, to no avail.

"Begin!" the blonde shouted mercilessly and leaned forward to better watch the battle.

Ami took a deep breath and raised her weapon into a guard position, holding onto it with both hands. The dragon had raised his right foreleg in a gesture that was cute - on a kitten batting at a ball of yarn. From her perspective, the four-toed limb was right at head height, ready to strike at a moment's notice, preventing her from getting even close enough to the body to attack. She had to admit

that the situation was eerily similar to facing the Reaper and his range advantage. Maybe Cathy did have a point with this exercise. *So how do I win? I am faster, probably, and more agile. A feint perhaps?*. Ami clenched her teeth in determination, mentally calculating the path that would keep her inside the monster's striking zone for the shortest amount of time. Muscles tensing were the only outward sign that announced her sudden dash through the sand. She leaned forward deeply, presenting a small profile, with her weapon held at her left, pointing backward. The looming paw of the dragon seemed to grow larger and larger. Now! Stirring up a crescent of sand, Ami threw herself to the side, swinging her sword so its momentum would enable an even sharper change of direction. Wind blew the bangs over her left temple aside as the paw whooshed past, and then she was within the monsters guard, with her weapon already in position for a backhanded swing.

"Watch out!"

Ami's world went black, foul-smelling, and very, very slimy.

Leaning down on the wall, Cathy shook her head. "First round goes to the dragon! And yes, that means you have to spit her out now!"

In the arena, Ami let out a scream of mixed horror and disgust, which came out somewhat muffled by the dragon jaws currently clamped shut over her head and part of her torso. A moment later, the opening maw released her, and she dropped into the sand, grimacing, and with her slobber-drenched shirt and hair clinging to her skin. Wiping her face, she protested "Eww! Get it off! This is so gross! Cathy, I need a break!"

"You'll have a bath later anyway, so deal with it. This teaches you to focus too much on an opponent's weapon, and not on what else he is doing. Now back into position! And don't drag the sword like that!" The blonde had at least the good grace to hide her amusement behind the mask of a strict taskmaster, and Ami complied, grumbling.

The blue-haired girl glared up at the dragon with red-blazing eyes, sure that his reptilian face was giggling at her plight. Her own expression became a mask of determination. She would not give up!

From above, Cathy observed the change in her disciple's stance. It looked as if she was properly motivated now. This should be interesting. Ah, the cautious approach this time, circling and holding the practice sword in a diagonal guard position. Silently, without giving away her intentions, the girl suddenly lunged forward. A green, scaled paw whistled down, only for the wooden weapon to block its path. The blonde warrior winced at the ensuing crash, then peered through the rising cloud of dust. Unfortunately, motivation alone could not make up for a lack of ability. Especially if the opponent was much stronger. Below, Mercury was lying on her belly, pinned down under the lizard's foot, and alternating between coughing up sand and glaring at the dragon and at her teacher. Cathy sighed. Better the girl had this kind of learning experiences in a controllable environment forgiving of her mistakes, rather than in a lethal duel to the death without second chances. "Dragon wins this round. Now let her get up already!"

A few days later, Ami's routine was interrupted by the much-anticipated flaring of the ward she had received from Snyder, indicating that someone was spying on her from a distance. Immediately, she dropped the book she was holding and rushed from the library, much to her warlocks' confusion. She didn't care though, and a crystal ball dropped into her waiting hands from thin air. With feverish haste, she conjured up a view of Rei's shrine, confirming that a fire reading was in process. Her actions seemed to be a cause of concern for her friends, and so she immediately conjured a well-prepared sign that spelled out in large, easily readable letters that, if they could see this, they should wave. Her heart leapt with joy when the tiny Usagi in the crystal ball immediately raised her hand and waved it left and right so hard that she risked falling over. Which she did after a moment, landing on Luna, who had been sitting at her side and been so focused on the fire that she didn't notice the impending danger.

Ami's hand went to her mouth and her eyes went round at what happened next. With a yowl, or so she assumed, the startled cat shot out from under the weight of the clumsy blonde, and collided with the sweating Rei, who was understandably distracted by

suddenly having a screeching feline in her long black hair. The vision in the fire went out as the shrine maiden toppled forward. Ami could feel tears of frustration gather in the corners of her eyes. "Darn it!"Through the scrying device, she was witnessing a huge fight - a red-faced Rei shouting at an apologetic Usagi, while Luna tried to run interference, but was only making things worse. Ami wished she could be there to mediate, like she usually did, and wondered how much worse the fights between her friends got without her being there. By now, it had deteriorated into both girls blowing raspberries at each other. Ami felt depressed at the lost chance. With Rei agitated like that, it was unlikely that she could calm down enough to sink back into the right meditative state for another fire reading. To the shrine maiden's credit, she did try, but there was no reaction from the ward affixed to the blue-haired senshi's wrist, despite the obvious strain and discomfort showing on the red-and-white dressed girl's face. Ami saw her slide to the ground in exhaustion, and suppressed the urge to punch the wall. Darn it! Of all the bad luck! She had been about to ask them to get a book with the Morse alphabet. This contact was obviously draining Rei a lot more than it did her, but last time, the shrine maiden had been able to sense Ami scrying on her. That would make it possible for Ami to use the crystal ball as a kind of telegraph, taking glimpses of differing length to transmit letters to Rei. But no, the opportunity was missed for the moment.

Ami knew that she had no psychic talents to speak of, in contrast to Rei, so the factor that made things easier on her had to be the crystal ball. She would have to see whether her books didn't contain any easily-made scrying devices that her friends would be able to assemble. It would be useful if Rei wasn't the only one who could establish contact if something urgent came up. Ami thought she had read something about a water-filled basin somewhere. Fighting her disappointment by busying herself with work, the blue-haired girl resumed her interrupted schedule.

Ami stepped out of the green whirlwind of motes swirling over her dungeon heart, marvelling at the vaulting ice above that glittered like emeralds in the light. She was here to do some routine

maintenance, replace some ice that had melted when the ship had entered warmer waters, and to see whether the propellers were still working correctly. Through the semi-opaque ice, she could dimly see the lights that burned in other corridors, all of which the imps had smoothed and engraved just as diligently as the dungeon heart chamber. Ami felt as if she was walking through a reflective, sparkling gem, and briefly wished her main dungeon could look like this. The breath condensing in front of her face reminded her that the ice ship wasn't really suited for inhabitation, and she moved herself to the engine room, rather than braving the smooth and slippery ice of the hallways that were doubly treacherous due to the slow, rolling motions of the vessel.

Lightning crept across the metallic assemblies set into the walls, sparking between metal prongs before flowing down the wires. Its light went more into the blue tones and reflected off of the chamber's walls so many times that the place looked lit as bright as day. Ami meticulously inspected each of the lightning traps, which were not really meant for constant low-level output. They seemed to hold up better to the perpetual wear and tear than the large ice rotors outside of the ship though, which needed frequent replacement. She would have to possess one of the golem crew and repeat that process, Ami thought. Maybe she should also break off the horizontal icicles that formed in the ship's wake, like the tail of a very slow-moving comet? A few quick calculations revealed that the detrimental effect of the short ice spikes on manoeuvrability and speed was negligible, and Ami decided that she quite liked the look. They could remain for now.

Turning her attention to other things, Ami noticed her reflection in one of the carved ice facets, taking in the faint red gleam of her eyes and the strange black and golden garb she had taken to wear as a dungeon keeper. Suddenly, she felt the strange and irrational urge to be back in her Sailor Mercury uniform. Well, this dungeon heart didn't have one of the wards that prevented her uniform from forming, did it? Ami quickly searched her surroundings for anyone who could possibly be watching - not that any of the golems or imps would care, really - and then quickly stripped off the opulent clothes she had bought a while ago. The icy cold caressed her skin, which got goosebumps from being exposed to the freezing temperatures.

"Mercury Power, Make Up!"

Azure light flashed through the chamber, refracted by the iceberg until it glowed from within for a brief instant. For Ami, it felt much longer, and she relished the familiar sensations of her sailor uniform coalescing from streamers of water, make-up appearing on her lips, and her body being cleaned. On reflex, she struck a pose in front of her mirror image in one of the ice facets, watching as it smiled back at her. It was great to look as she should once again! For the most part, anyway, as the black symbols on the collar denoting her magical skills had reappeared. The necromancy skull looked much more elaborate, while the teleportation squiggle had remained mostly the same. More symbols that she couldn't identify were evenly spaced between the original two, arranged so that they followed the lines in the cloth. A cold breeze brushing past Ami's legs made her straighten and wrap her arms around herself as she shivered. *Well, the skirt is rather short for this kind of environment*, Ami though ruefully. An imp scuttled past, dressed identically to the young Keeper. All in all, the sailor uniform was rather appropriate, given current circumstances, even if it looked strange on the little creature. It fit much better on the golems, whose bodies were identical to Ami's, after all. Continuing her inspection, Ami wondered what visitors would make of this place.

The cadence of Jered's steps on the ground increased in pace when he heard a short, terrified cry from the training hall, followed by a clanking noise. What kind of strange exercise had Cathy concocted now? When the noise repeated, he pushed the tall wooden door open a hand's width and peered in through the slit. Nothing out of the ordinary was immediately visible, though he could see his girlfriend in the delightfully short skirt she had gotten used to wearing, facing away from him and toward the arena. Pushing the door fully open, he walked inside. There was another scream, and a small, armoured, and blue-haired figure shot vertically up from the pit, tumbling around her own axis, and flailing with a long wooden sword held in her right hand. A moment later, she plummeted back down and out of sight. The wavy-haired man looked at the blonde, who was just shaking her head at the sight. There was a clang from

below, and a moment later, Ami ascended again, letting out another yelp before she dropped back down. Jered blinked at the sight and approached to see what was going on. To his horrified amazement, there was a dragon lying on his back in the arena, throwing and catching the girl like a ball while she tried to whack it with her training weapon.

He turned to the woman nominally supervising the 'battle', wondering how she could possibly think this was a good idea. "Um, shouldn't you put a stop to that?"

"Indeed," Cathy growled. With her hands on her hips, she shouted "Oh, come on you two, take this seriously!"

Hearing the instruction, Ami stopped her fall in mid-air and righted herself, then swept down toward the dragon, whose tail lashed out in a lazy arc as he rolled himself to the side in order to get up.

"They tend to goof off now and again," Cathy explained. "Technically speaking, they are both kids."

Jered watched Mercury block the tail strike with her sword. Scales met wood with a loud smack, and the smaller figure was hurled backward, but steadied herself while still in the air and landed in a combat stance, dragging small furrows into the sand with her feet. "So it looks as if she has figured out that flight spell," the wavy haired man commented. "Is that the armour she was working on?" He was referencing the brightly-gleaming suit of plate mail that encased all of the young Keeper, except for her head.

"No, that's just something I had the trolls build for her. She needs to get used to the weight and feel. Besides, it offers some additional protection, which helps."

In the arena below the two observers, Ami was pumping her legs and focusing her attention on her opponent as the walls seemed to rush past her, breathing hard. There comes the claw swipe! Her legs stretched, carrying her over the sweeping flailing of the draconic limb. It was behind her now, which meant... turning and forcing her arm muscles to comply with the need for speed, she brought her sword down in the nick of time, interposing it between her body and

the backhand blow coming from below. Rather than trying to put force against force, she rode out the shock, letting it carry her upward and past the head of the creature. The long, serpentine neck shot forward, but the wide-open jaws collided with the sword that Ami was holding like a staff, one hand on the haft, the other gauntlet steadying the blade close to the tip. This time, she didn't allow the blow to send her reeling. After bouncing back the distance of two steps, still in mid-air, she simply changed her direction. If she could shoot over her opponent's shoulder, she would have a clear swing at his neck. With a somersault, she pulled her legs out of way of the snapping maw, descending toward her destination all the while. This was it! This time, she would finally win!

A loud ringing noise went through the hall. "I can see why she would need the extra protection," Jered commented, looking at the two huge, leathery wings that had just smacked together above the dragon's spine, closing on Mercury as if she was a fly that had gotten between two clapping hands. The limbs opened, and the gleaming figure trapped between them dropped to the ground, bouncing off of the dragons back on the way down. Was the creature snickering? With some relief, he noted that the Keeper was already pulling her hand through her short blue hair, pouring some green energy into a bump.

"Don't just sit there! You are in range, keep fighting!" Cathy encouraged. As one, dragon and girl turned their head to the where Ami's sword had fallen. She could have retrieved it with barely a thought, but she wasn't allowed to rely on her Keeper powers during these training combats. So, the girl threw herself toward the weapon stuck in the sand, while the dragon unhinged his jaws. Ami could see the leg of her opponent loom like a pillar to her left as she dove toward the two-hander, and the world spun around her as she rolled back to her feet, the blade in her hand. A textbook recovery, so why were her instincts screaming at her?

Bright orange light flared, illuminating the dusty ceiling of the training hall. "Holy crap!" Jered exclaimed, eyes going wide as Mercury's slight form disappeared in the curtain of flame pouring from the giant lizard's mouth. He was about to jump over the stone railing to see if she was still alive when she felt a hand on her shoulder.

"Don't worry. With both the dragon and the Reaper being immune to fire, she has had enough examples to work with to make her own protection spell. She's fine."

Ami's large eyes blinked in her blackened face. Her hair was blown backwards and remained that way, stabilised by the soot particles coating it. A crinkling noise drew her attention to the weapon in her hands, which was on fire. White ash flaked away, leaving nothing in its wake.

"Dragon wins! Again!", Cathy called, now that Mercury had been effectively disarmed. "Break for now!" She spared more attention for her green-dressed boyfriend now. "So what brings you here?"

Ami appeared at their side, already rubbing her head furiously with a towel. A gust of wind blew sand all across the room as the dragon used his wings to assist his climb out of the combat pit.

"News about Arachne. The Baron's forces have destroyed her dungeon," Jered reported, "few casualties, I don't think anyone died."

"How did they do it?" Ami asked, intrigued and relieved.

"It wasn't that difficult, after Jadeite had weakened the defences so much. While the dungeon heart being in the ceiling prevented him from letting magma flow onto it, the dwarves digging down from above could just remove the earth it was affixed to, and CRASH," he illustrated the statement by slamming his fist into his palm, "down the shaft it goes. Arachne couldn't do much without troops. She did enlarge another spider, but it was tiny to start with and didn't get much bigger than your dragon here, and the troops shot it with a ballista before it could do much damage."

"I see. Thanks for informing me," Ami replied, smiling happily at the thought that her efforts had managed to prevent the loss of life that would have been inevitable if the Baron had attacked a fully combat-ready dungeon. This was great, she was finally doing some good!

The bath water was warm, filled with scented bubbles, and a balm for sore limbs after the latest training session. Ami looked at her upper arms and shoulders that were protruding from the water's surface. She had gained some muscle tone, but her skin was nearly as pale as the alabaster that the large tub was carved from. She needed to get out into the sun more, she thought with a wry smile. At least she was making good progress on both the armour research and the training front, even if she had yet to win a fight against the dragon. What she really enjoyed were her magic lessons, though. Who would have thought that one day, she would be studying under *Jadeite*? Well, unless he disguised himself as a teacher for one of his schemes. She giggled. Today, he had mentioned that some of her Keeper powers, namely moving things around physically without putting them into storage space, reminded him of his own speciality, telekinesis, and he thought that she might be able to develop them into something more useful, with his help.

Ami's eyelids closed while she relished the warmth of the bath and relaxed. Her mind began to drift, and with it, her mind's eye view of parts of the dungeon. It was a bit like floating on a cloud that was blown this way or that way. There were the labs. The farms. She'd have to see how they worked one of these days when she was less busy. There was Snyder, tinkering with a gold-tipped brush. The orcs, using the training room. Jadeite, taking off his uniform jacket in his room. Tiredly, the senshi's mental sight rested there for a moment. He had such good ideas sometimes. And such a dreamy smile. Not to mention nice abs.

Ami's eyes flew open as she realised what she was doing. Her pupils were small like pinpricks, and she blushed. Oh no, no, no! She hadn't just thought that! She couldn't be developing a crush on Jadeite, of all people! Could she?

Her rapid heartbeat was the only sound in the silent room, and she forcibly breathed in and out at an even rate. Panicking would not help. She had to think logical about this. He was handsome - make that very handsome, did not look that much older than her (after all, she would be fifteen soon!), was polite and pleasant to her most of the time, and she spent several hours a day with him. It was only natural that she'd find him attractive. Teenage hormones and so on.

It was also completely wrong and dangerous. Only a few weeks ago, he had still been a dark general. She didn't even know how loyal he was yet. This was such a complication she didn't need. He was her employee. He was also her teacher, which made things doubly wrong. He was dangerous and powerful, but he was also a useful asset. He was currently taking off his pants. "Eeep!"

With burning cheeks, Ami bent her knees and let herself sink deeper into the water, until her head was completely submerged. Bubbles rose to the surface as she let out a long sigh. Why did these things have to happen to her?

A storm howled, and waves of brackish yellow-tinged water washed against the sides of the swimming dungeon, sending up sprays of foam as they broke against the ice. Clad in her senshi uniform, Ami stood on the flat deck and peered into the twilight, a dark silhouette against the horizon. Only an angular strip of blue covering her eyes was brighter, illuminated by glowing numbers and the red light shining behind the visor. Deep-hanging clouds the colours of lead and rust chased each other in the sky, forming an oppressive ceiling. The Avatar Islands were less than half a day's journey ahead, but it looked as if trouble might be afoot.

Or, more precisely, in the air. Ami's gaze followed a V-shaped flight of seven lights that defied the winds and were moving in her direction.

"Confirmed, Keeper. They are fairies. I assume that they come from one or more warships patrolling the area to make sure that nothing escapes from the islands." a voice in her head provided her with the opinion of her staff back at the command centre.

Ami's lips became a thin line as she tracked the progress of the figures. Her vessel was for the most part underwater, and barely visible even in good conditions, which these were not. "Shabon Spray!" Her magical fog appeared, but did not resist the gusts of froth-carrying wind for more than a few seconds. Ami's hands clasped each other. She did not want to fight good guys. *Please don't notice me,* she pleaded silently.

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Fairy Attack

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Distorted by the droplets of foamy sea water that the wind had splattered across her visor, Ami could see the seven glowing spots in the sky grow larger as they approached. They had just corrected for a course adjustment of her ice ship, so the blue-haired girl was now completely sure that they were coming for her. What should she do? *Maybe I could ask Jadeite for another glamour and play the half-starved, shipwrecked survivor?* Feeling her cheeks warm at the thought of the curly haired blonde, Ami immediately chided herself for the reaction and rejected the idea. She shouldn't bother him for every little thing, and besides, that strategy would buy her very little time at best. She would be taken to their ship, where her story would fall apart near-instantaneously under questioning. On her visor's display, she could now see the leader of the cone-shaped formation stretch out her hand and point at the slender figure on the iceberg. The time for deception had passed.

Ami disappeared below deck. Maybe they'd just go away if they couldn't find an entrance? No, that was wishful thinking. The dimensionally displaced schoolgirl looked up at the ceiling, as if she could track the seven white-dressed figures through the thick layer of ice. If they were really determined, they could probably melt their way through the frozen layer with little difficulty. The continuous thundering of the waves against the hull of Ami's vessel reminded her that the incoming fairies had to be *very* determined to be flying through this storm. With a sigh, the senshi resigned herself to the fact that she would probably have to fight them, and put her hands together in front of her chest defensively. A moment later, she became a column of swirling black energy that shot toward the closest sailor-suited statue. A glow like red-hot embers flared up behind the frozen eyes, and the golem's facial features now mirrored Ami's previous expression. Now moving the body of the possessed simulacrum, she transported herself back to the icy plain forming the top of her ship. Maybe, just maybe, she could talk her way out of this.

Amidst the howling of the storm, the seven glowing forms streaked down from the tumultuous sky towards the transparent figure waiting below. As they approached, sheathed in a layer of magic that incessantly shed golden sparkles, Ami could make out more details. All seven incoming fairies were female, and they certainly liked to leave no doubt about that. Since coming to this world, only some of the underworlders whom Ami had met had been wearing less. *Possibly due to the difference in climate*, she thought. She hadn't exactly been in these warm, tropical regions during her brief stint on the surface. In any case, the white swimsuit-like outfits that the women were wearing seemed practical, in that they wouldn't get in the way while flying, and that occasional splashes from the waves below wouldn't weigh the fabric down much. The large cut-out circle on the back made sense too, as the dragonfly-like wings protruding just below the women's shoulder blades needed to be able to move freely. The smaller gap in the front, strategically positioned to reveal a good amount of cleavage, had to be for vanity purposes, though.

Ami took a wider-legged, more stable stance as she looked up at the flying intruders, who broke formation as they spread out around her. Dripping golden powder as if it was snow, the fairies slowly flew around the young Keeper, their twin pairs of insectile wings beating with an odd tingling noise. As the girls circled her like vultures, Ami noted that each one had a different hair colour, which, when taken all together, formed the whole spectrum of a rainbow. Large, triangular silver tiaras prevented strands of hair from sliding down into the women's faces.

"Evil creature! You are in violation of the Mukrezarian Blockade! Surrender and come quietly, or we will be forced to destroy you!" the indigo-haired flier demanded, hovering in the air before Ami.

"I have no interest in fighting you. Can't you just let me pass peacefully?" the girl made of ice and water replied, trying hard to keep her exasperation out of her voice.

"No! We know that you are transporting something terrible, and we won't let you get away with it!" another fairy, the blonde one, interrupted, puffing out her chest. She had roundish, child-like facial features and was the shortest of the bunch, and so the intimidating gesture fell flat.

"I'm serious. I don't want to hurt you. Please leave!" Ami pleaded, putting her hands on her hips.

"You? Hurt us? Ohohoho!" the green-haired one laughed, and on an unseen signal, all the fairies shot up into the air.

Like three glitter-trailing comets, the blond-, red-, and orange-haired fairies came back down first. "You are facing..." they began, stopping their forward movement to hover in a formation that formed an upward-pointing equilateral triangle.

"... the most elite full-fairy..." three more voices joined in, and the girls whom Ami had come to think of as Violet, Blue, and Green, took position between their predecessors, forming a downward-pointed inner triangle.

"...aerial recon force..." Indigo completed the pattern, zooming into the dead centre.

"...of the Shining Concord Empire!" the fairies fluttered closer together, narrowing the gaps between each other enough that their wing tips nearly touched. In unison, they shouted "Justice will triumph!", and each one struck a pose, angling knees or extending arms and legs so that the entire group of fairies resembled an opening, glittering flower.

Ami blinked, somewhat baffled by the spectacle. *Is this how our enemies feel when Sailor Moon gives her speech?* Out loud, she latched on to a specific part of their introduction "Excuse me? Most elite out of how many?" she asked curiously.

Blushing, the red-haired fairy snapped "That's not important! And who are you, villain, just so we know who we defeated?"

Ami's senshi nature screamed at her to go through a similarly intricate series of poses while she introduced herself. While floating in the air and ocean waves loomed behind her. Displaying great restraint, she resisted the urge. She would probably end up thoroughly drenching herself if she tried to control the waves like that, and flying in a borrowed body was right out. The skills she was learning from Jadeite relied on conditioning the body to channel

magic properly at least as much as they did on knowing what she was doing. That had its own, worrisome implications, but at least it couldn't be as bad for her health as being cut up with a scythe. In any case, telling who she was to the 'heroes' would be stupid. Nobody needed to know that Keeper Mercury was interested in the Avatar Islands for some reason. "Sorry for my rudeness, but I do not intend to tell you my name," she excused herself.

"No matter. Camilla, Melissa, Anise, find a way inside the iceberg! We'll deal with the enemy!" the central indigo-haired fae ordered, prompting Blond, Blue, and Red to break formation. "Have at you!"

The rise of the indigo-haired fairy's right hand was all the warning Ami got before a stream of lightning shot from her opponent's fingers. With a short backward hop, she dodged the pinkish blast that carved sizzling grooves into the ice.

"She's fast!" came a voice from her left.

"Not fast enough. NOW!" the four fairies focusing their efforts on the young senshi all attacked at once. Dancing reflections flashed on the ice as four bands of lightning hurled themselves toward Ami, but only one was on target. The others were aimed such that, no matter which way she dodged, she would intersect the path of one. Crackling electricity crawled over her shoulder, making the attached limb twitch. With a hiss, steam escaped from cracks in the shell.

"Had enough yet?" the lead fairy asked, flashing a confident grin at her opponent, taking in the way her left arm hung down uselessly. "Last chance to surrender!"

Ami grimaced. The lightning as such wasn't particularly dangerous to her golem body, as its ice hull was already regenerating. It was certainly nothing on the level Keepers like Arachne or even herself could throw around. Her main problem was figuring out a way to scare off her opponents without having to seriously hurt them. They were all slightly taller than her, but they also looked delicate and fragile. The thought that she might lose didn't even cross her mind. This was a fight on her own territory. "I am less than impressed," she drawled, trying to go for outright intimidation this time. "Observe!" the red light in her eyes intensified, and she raised the

damaged arm, which knit itself together even as her opponents looked on, eliciting startled gasps.

"Just because she can regenerate from one shot doesn't mean she can do it for more!" Violet fairy shouted, "Keep it up!"

More bolts of lightning caressed Ami's surface, scorching the golem's sailor uniform until it smoked and blackened from the abuse. The possessed statue could feel parts of her surface boil away and more steam release from the water kept within, but simply grabbed up some seawater with her Keeper powers to replace what was being lost. Maybe weathering the best her attackers could throw at her would make them go away when they realised the futility of it? However, she really should do something about the digger trio that had landed a short distance away and was now searching for the spot where the ice was thinnest.

"Shabon Spray Freezing!" The blast of supercooled bubbles raced forward to the three scantily-clad girls, lighting the area with its bluish glow.

"I'm on it!" a bell-like voice shouted out from above, and the green-haired fae swept down in a crescent-shaped arc, interposing herself between the projectile and the team of diggers. "Reflect!" Green shouted triumphantly, and the spell struck a glass-like hexagonal barrier that sprang into existence in front of her. "Aargh!"

Instead of reversing direction like the girl had expected, the spell merely bounced off skyward, and the impact sent the light-weight woman careening toward the teammates she had been trying to protect, bowling them over as she skidded over the slippery wet ice before dropping over the edge and splashing into the sea. Ami hoped she could swim.

"Tilia!" the other fairies shouted in fright.

"I'll get her," the blue-haired ex-digger exclaimed while she stood up.

"Damn, she's strong!" Orange complained, anger swinging in her voice, mixed with some worry at her lightning doing nothing more than making her opponent sparkle brightly and surrounding her with

steam.

"She's made of ice," another voice interrupted, "use fire, you dolts!"

"Sooo inelegant!" the violet-haired fairy whined, already forming a red glow in her cupped hands.

Out of the corner of her eye, Ami saw the blue-haired fae climb back onto the ice plateau with the one who had gone overboard slung over her shoulder, and breathed out in relief. Both looked like half-drowned dogs, and their wings were hanging limp and useless from their backs. An approaching orange glow alerted her to the danger she was currently in. An entire barrage of fireballs was converging on her position. All of the iceberg reflected the fiery glow of the explosion, lighting the twilight bright as day for an instant.

"Yay! Direct hit! We did it!" the blond fairy cheered, dancing a little jig with her arms held high in a victory pose.

"Sorry to disappoint, but that did nothing. Leave!" Ami commanded sternly as the storm blew away the cloud of steam veiling her. Perfect. That should get them moving, she hoped. The fireproof spell she had researched for the Reaper duel was proving to be more useful than she had expected. She took a step forward in the melt-water filled crater that the bombardment had opened under her feet, frowning when her enemies looked smug rather than intimidated.

"Gotcha!" The cry came from directly behind the possessed statue, and she could see a flash of movement reflected in the pool of water swirling around her legs. Acting on reflexes drilled into her during the painful close-combat training with Cathy, she ducked. A half-moon shaped sabre whistled through the space her neck had occupied an instant before, and the senshi's left hand already scythed backward in an arc enhanced by the pirouetting motion she was using to whirl around and face her attacker. With a hard thump, the appendage struck into flesh like a hammer, and Ami could see the redhead tumble back, holding her throat and making a strangled noise as her weapon dropped out of her nerveless fingers. The Fae's ruby eyes met the Keeper's blazing ones and teared up before she dropped to her knees.

"NO! Anise!" the chorus of bell-like voices sounded more frightened and angry this time.

Ami gaped. She hadn't aimed for the neck, that hit had been an unfortunate accident. That looked dangerous and needed immediate help, or the woman might asphyxiate. The senshi took a step toward the woman writhing on the ground to help her, but her feet wouldn't cooperate. Looking down, she saw that the pool had turned into ice, a thin layer of which was even now creeping up her legs.

"You aren't the only one who can control frost, monster!" the indigo-haired fairy sneered with hate in her voice, moving her hands continuously in a circle while more ice proceeded to encase Ami.

The young Keeper managed to turn her head back to the redhead before it too was immobilised. Immediately, the blonde landed next to her fallen comrade and dragged her away, then knelt down and uncorked several flasks hanging from her belt as she started to treat the choking fairy. Feeling guilty, Ami opted to refrain from simply transporting herself out from underneath the ice. Maybe if she remained still for now, the idea that the team of rainbow-coloured attackers should retreat would have enough time to sink in?

"Quickly, sisters, while she is trapped! The sealing formation!"

All of the remaining fairies landed around the Sailor Mercury statue that was nearly indistinguishable from the ice covering her. Ami's heart sank. What would it take for them to give up? At least the blonde was still tending to the redhead and not joining into the battle.

"Right! Everyone, join your magic and keep her trapped until our ship can get here!" Glowing lines crept along the uneven ice of the floor, connecting the five standing fairies with each other and forming a pentagram enclosed by a pentagon. The magical beings glowed like golden candles in the on setting darkness, still shedding golden glitter that was carried away by the winds. Each fae was extending her palms toward Ami, pouring power into a barrier that had appeared around her location.

A ship was coming? That changed the situation. Ami didn't want to

have to fight even more innocents, and destroying the ship's rudder sounded like the best way to stop it before it could get here. Unfortunately, that would leave these glittery annoyances on her vessel, and they were certainly magically powerful enough to find and destroy her dungeon heart while she was away on an errand. This was a problem. She would have to knock them out as gently as possible. However, when she tried to move herself out of her frozen coffin, she encountered an unexpected resistance. Outside, the five fairies buckled as if struck. Ami would have frowned if she could have, and tried again.

"Ugh! Steady now, sisters!" the indigo fairy, who seemed to be the leader of the group, encouraged the others. Despite the encouraging words, she was swaying as much as her younger-looking siblings. "She can't possibly keep this up! No! STEADY!"

"Aiiie!"

Ami winced in sympathy when the green-haired fairy faltered, causing the seal to waver and violently disintegrate under the opposing forces. The thunderstorm of multi-coloured lightning springing from the released magics shattered her prison and blew her captors off their feet. They were lying on the ice, groaning and gasping in pain. Shallow red cuts from flying shards marred the white of their outfits in several places. At least their confidence seemed as shattered as their ward now.

"No, impossible! What *is* she? Not even Keepers should have reserves like that!" Violet mumbled in disbelief, holding her head.

"She's too powerful! Please, sisters, return to the ship! Save yourselves!" the green-haired fairy implored the others.

Inwardly, Ami was smiling and agreeing whole-heartedly with her. Yes! Go away! You don't have to suffer for no reason!

Blue agreed. "Yes, you need to warn the captain of the danger! Please go, we don't all need to die here!"

"Tilia, Melissa, we won't abandon you! Don't dare ask that again!" the redhead, who had her arm slung around the blonde's shoulders

and was leaning on her, croaked out.

"Yeah, we aren't leaving anyone behind! We are going to kick this monster's arse!" Orange declared, shooting a glare at Ami.

What? Why were they - Oh. Ami understood what was going on now. The two fairies who had taken a bath in the ocean couldn't fly with those sodden wings, and their friends wouldn't abandon them. Just how she wouldn't dream of abandoning Usagi or Rei to save herself.

The five dry faeries exchanged looks, and then all nodded in determination. Bleeding and bruised, they turned as one to face their opponent once more, and dropped into battle stances.

Ami tried to dissuade them again. "Wait! I really don't want to hurt you! Just give up already. Please!"

"She must be weakening too! We have a chance," Orange misinterpreted the attempt at diplomacy completely. "Let's all attack togeth- eek!" "What the!?" "Cold! cold!" "Where do- aiiie!"

Enough was enough. Before the seven could injure themselves more trying to fight her, Ami tapped her store of stashed-away Shabon Spray Freezings. Appearing only a hand's width in front of their targets and striking with no warning, the spells froze the fairies' legs and lower bodies, rendering them immobile. Ami quickly walked to the closest one, Indigo, who kept throwing lightning bolts at her in growing desperation and shivered in dread. The simulacrum put her frozen palm on the woman's collarbone, despite the fae's efforts to lean away. Both the golem and her victim were surrounded by a black aura for a few seconds, and then the latter slumped and went still.

"Nooo! Dandel! Leave her alone! Leave her the hell alone you abomination!" Green - Tilia - screamed helplessly.

"She- she just sucked the life out of her!" another voice stated in shock, its owner trying hard to not burst into tears. Violet had already lost that fight, and was sobbing uncontrollably.

Ami felt incredibly depressed listening to them. She wasn't trying to frighten or hurt them, she just needed them out of action while she went to sabotage their ship. And a quick energy drain was the most gentle method she had. They would be fine once she returned the energy, she had seen that often enough. She quickened her pace as she walked toward Orange, heedless of the lightning that was still being sporadically thrown in her direction.

"Roselle! Catch! Save yourself!" the blonde in the back cried, having just untangled something from her belt. Its shape, that of a miniature amphora, raised warning signs in the back of Ami's mind. What came in- oh yes, that magic-dispelling water. If it hit the ice trapping Orange, who was apparently called Roselle, then- the golem was suddenly in front of the trapped Fae without crossing the intervening space. The woman's eyes widened in shock when a cold and hard palm slammed down on her collarbone. With no time to spare, Ami tried to drain her as quickly as possible before she could get loose. The amphora impacted and burst, scattering a rain of fine droplets onto both the fairy and her captor. The energy drain abruptly ceased as both the entrapping ice and the golem turned into slush, much to Roselle's and Ami's surprise.

"It - it was conjured? Roselle, you must get that information back to the ship! That's the way to beat her!"

Anger-filled orange eyes came to rest on the black column of energy that was rapidly coalescing into human shape, sprouting protrusions that narrowed into the shape of a head, arms, and legs. Before Mercury had completed her forced manifestation, Roselle was already attacking. In human form, the lightning hurt a lot, and Ami heard herself scream before she managed to move herself below deck. Lying on her belly and feeling the cold of the ice floor even through her uniform, with muscle spasms crippling her attempts to get up, the senshi used her Keeper sight to see what her opponent was up to. Oh, the fairy was shaking her indigo-haired friend, trying to wake her up, instead of making a run for the ship. Ami felt horrible for taking advantage of the woman's compassion like that, but released another stored freezing spell at her legs remotely. If the vulnerability of her minions became widely known, they would become worthless for combat, and then she would be forced to use

real living beings as soldiers. Possessing another simulacrum, the teenager moved herself back uponto the battlefield, behind the fairies, and rapidly finished the distasteful task of sending them all into unconsciousness.

That left the question what to do with her captives, both in the short and the long term. She didn't have enough gold on the ship to create a proper prison, but a room with no exits should be safe enough for the moment, now that she had them drained of energy. Shudder. *I really am becoming a monster. What would Usagi, Rei and Luna say?* In any case, she couldn't leave her beaten opponents outside in the wind and trapped up to their waists in ice. They would freeze to death. Reaching a decision, Ami moved the helpless fairies into one of the vessel's chambers, wrapped them into several layers of conjured blankets, and positioned some guards. That should hold them for the moment. She would deal with them properly once she had neutralised the approaching ship.

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Dealing with the Blockade Ship

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Contrary to Ami's expectations, she had little trouble finding the vessel from which the fairies had come despite the onset of the night. She was in a golem body, transporting herself in the direction that her recent attackers had arrived from, and staying low enough that her feet skimmed the waves from time to time. If anything, it was easier to spot the large warship in the darkness, as the lights on its deck beckoned like beacons. The ship was cruising straight toward her iceberg, and so she was approaching the keel that loomed above the sea level like a black cliff directly from the front. This gave her a straight-on view of the wind filled-sails emblazoned with a symbol that consisted of three straight swords, which were arranged in such a way that the blades crossed each other in one central point. A wreath of green laurels encircled the six-pointed star formed by the downward-pointing weapon. *Hmm, they are making good progress, even if the storm is at a bit off an angle to their current course. If I can take out their rudder long enough, they won't be able to catch up with me,* Ami thought as she calculated the different angles and velocities in her head, hoping that there wasn't some part about sailing that she was missing because she was so unfamiliar with it.

Excited shouts carried by the wind drew the ice girl's attention back to the ship that was still barrelling down on her position. Angular silhouettes were leaning over the ceiling, peering into the darkness, and pointing. She could also make out the triangular cones of wizard hats between the occasional flashes of armour. *So they can detect my approach,* the swimming senshi thought. Golden shimmers rose from the ship and fanned out in a search pattern. Satisfied that the patrol ship knew that she was here, but not exactly where she was, Ami transported herself underwater, where the clear ice she was made of should be all but invisible. Then she waited. Soon enough, a shadow fell over her, and the clam-encrusted wood of the vessel's hull passed overhead so closely that she could reach out and touch it. A sudden feeling of revulsion shook her to the core, and she shied

away, unconsciously raising an arm to shield her face as she did so. While unexpected, she recognised the power radiating from the hull from previous exposure. *Holy magic! The entire ship is blessed!* The rejection by the forces of Good stung, but she was more worried about what kind of protection it would imbue the enemy vessel with. Hopefully, nothing that would prevent her senshi magic from working properly.

The rearmost edge of the ship's wood passed overhead, and Ami could see the large wooden rudder protruding from its back. She just had to jam the oar blade with some ice so it couldn't move, and then she'd be able to outrun the enemy no problem! She raised her hands to her collarbone, then thrust them out forward, while three short spurts of bubbles escaped from her mouth. Shouting the incantation of the Shabon Spray Freezing did not work well and came out as some gargles, but this didn't seem to matter to the magic. Starting from Ami's fingertips, a fan of icicles sprang forward, growing in the targets direction and then enveloping it. The girl's red-glowing eyes widened in surprise when concentric circles of purple light raced outward from the point of impact, travelling across the wood like ripples across a pond, and she quickly swam backward, putting some distance between herself and the ship. Well, at least it didn't seem to do anything to actually free the rudder, so she should be fine - what was that moving in from above?

A thin line of bubbles shot into the ice statue's direction, and she struggled against the surrounding liquid's resistance in order to evade. It was no use. Guided by its bluish-glimmering tip, the projectile curved and tracked her unerringly. Ami felt a sharp jerk when something pierced her ice shell between her breasts and then went out through her back. Looking down, she saw a long, barbed rod of steel protruding from her chest. A chain looped through a ring at its end was ascending to the surface of the ocean. She had just been harpooned? While she fingered the metal rod bemusedly, the chain went taut, and she felt herself being reeled in like a fish on a hook. Having nowhere near the weight of a whale, she couldn't put up much resistance against the pull. While the planks of the hull passed her on her ascent, she spotted motion next to the rudder. A small, bearded form had appeared aside the block of ice and was hitting it with a pickaxe. To Ami's chagrin, the frozen water was

giving way under its blows just as easily as rock crumbled under the ministrations of her imps. She couldn't allow that to happen!

She made another unpleasant discovery when her attempt to teleport off the harpoon produced no results. Was this some hero trickery, or was the dungeon heart considering her a prisoner? It looked as if she needed an alternative solution. With a quick mental command, she yanked two of her golems away from their post on the iceberg, and made them re-appear next to the dwarf. She could see his eyes go wide behind his goggles when the two female-looking ice shapes started paddling toward him, baring their teeth. With great haste, he tugged twice on a rope slung around his left leg. An instant later, he disappeared upwards, his beard trailing behind him like the tendrils of a sea anemone. Ami nodded in satisfaction before returning her attention to her own precarious situation. She could just possess one of her other creations here, but that didn't help with the rudder at all. The ice was no good if the crew could just chip it away, and there was nothing stopping them from harpooning any guards she left behind. What could she do? The turbulent surface of the ocean was approaching rapidly. Oh! Got it!

Ami's body counted as her territory for Keeper power purposes, and the steel embedded within would hopefully conduct electricity much better than the surrounding salt water. Concentrating hard, the possessed simulacrum sent Keeper lightning into the rod, toning it down as much as she could. She wanted to give whoever was on the other end a good scare, not injure them. Of course, some of the power went into her own structure, but it was nothing the golem's regeneration couldn't handle, especially immersed in water as it was here. The ploy worked. Immediately, she felt the chain go slack and swam back towards the rudder as fast as she could, icy arms and legs pumping furiously. Suddenly, she felt a strong current go through the line, and bubbles started forming along the length of the rod and the chain. The heroes were turning her own trick against her! She could vividly imagine some fairies up there throwing lightning bolts at the weapon's line. Gritting her teeth, Ami continued onward to her destination. Aside from the discomfort, this was actually helpful in a way. With each jolt, the harpoon slid out a bit further before the melted ice could refreeze around it.

When the senshi finally reached the rudder, she only had to melt a little bit of herself to get the last finger length of the weapon out of herself. *It's a good things the golems aren't really able to feel pain,* she thought while she shoved the harpoon through the narrow gap between the ship's hull and the rudder. On the other side, one of the other simulacrums took it and handed it back, going around the large piece of wood this time. Together, they managed to wrap the chain attached to the barbed piece of metal several times around the rudder before Ami secured it with a knot. Sadly, it didn't look as if her opponents were stupid enough to tug at the chain until this vital piece of their steering system came off. Well, they didn't have to. The senshi fired off another Shaboon Spray Freezing, aimed at the chain, which went taut once more when the large block of ice now attached to it tried to float to the surface, scraping the clams off of the ship's hull as it touched them on its ascent. It reached the end of its 'leash', and Ami rapidly fired off more freezing spells, increasing the nascent iceberg's volume. Soon its, its buoyancy was too much for the tormented wood of the rudder, which was ripped out of its mounting. Now free to continue its ascent, the large clump of ice did just that, jumping out of the sea's surface like a cork and giving the sailors up above a good scare. The young Keeper observing from below the waves winced at the deep thud that the lorry-sized mass made when it collided with the ship, but through the curtain of bubbles that surrounded the block as it dipped back down, she could see that the vessel had taken no damage, or at least none below the water line. Now convinced that her pursuers would be delayed for at least as long as she needed, she hurriedly moved herself back to her floating dungeon, taking the other two golems along.

The seven blanket-wrapped bundles lying next to each other on the frozen floor seemed worryingly still to Ami. Only close observation revealed that the chests of their occupants were slowly rising and falling in synch with their shallow breaths. The faces of the captured fairies looked deathly pale, but the young Keeper hoped that this was only a trick of the blue-tinted light shining through the ice forming the walls. She had stashed her unconscious prisoners close together like sardines in a can, allowing them to share body heat, and hoped this would stave off the worst hypothermia. Right now,

she was kneeling down next to one of the fairies and putting her hand on the woman's clammy forehead. The fae's eyelid twitched once at the touch, but she did not react in any other way. Ami frowned in worry at feeling the temperature, which seemed low to her. Was this normal for their species, or couldn't they produce enough heat in their drained state? Well, she had better do something about this. At her command, a bunch of imps stormed into the room, staring in wonder with their orb-like black eyes. They cocked their heads in puzzlement before taking enthusiastically to their strange new assignment, letting out cheerful yelps and giggles as they climbed cautiously over the prone forms and then lay down on top of the covers and went still. Ami nodded, satisfied that they weren't pressing down dangerously on any fragile parts of the girls. This wasn't an optimal way of keeping her prisoners warm, but it was the best she could do at the moment.

Ami rose to her feet and stared at the young-looking faces lined up in front of her. They looked like cheerful, happy kind of people. Did they have friends worrying about them back on the ship? Loved ones that would miss them if they didn't return from their mission? Parents who would be waiting anxiously for any news about their disappearance? The blue-haired girl was reminded of her own mother, whom she hadn't seen in over a month now. She must be beside herself with worry by now. Would the other senshi have told her about her daughter's extracurricular activities, or was she still completely in the dark? Ami hung her head and felt a tear trickle down her cheek as she experienced a sudden bout of overwhelming homesickness. It was nearly enough to make her just let her captives go to spare others the same pain. She still didn't know what to do with the team of seven. Was preventing knowledge about the weakness of her golems worth robbing these well-meaning intruders of their freedom? Ami straightened suddenly. Actually, she didn't know. How common was that magic-dissolving water, anyway? With renewed hope for a more palatable solution, the senshi displaced herself to the beating dungeon heart and hopped into its pit, emerging back home at her main base.

"Gah!" Startled, Snyder twitched when the short-haired girl suddenly materialised in front of his workbench, and he bumped his knees against its wood because he nearly fell off his seat. The sleeves of

his white and red robes swept some of his chisels off the table as he waved his arms to maintain his balance. "Please, Mercury, could you refrain from doing that? One of these days, you are going to give me a heart attack."

Ami, whose eyes had gone round at the sight, inclined her head apologetically, and used her powers to put the tools that had clattered to the ground back onto the table. "Sorry, I was in a bit of a hurry. I have a question about this magic-suppressing blessed water you have used a few times. How difficult is it to produce?"

The redhead straightened out his clothes and scratched his chin. "Unfortunately, it is not something that I could prepare here. The proper ceremonies require an experienced priest of considerable power working at a temple, which is nothing that I can emulate here."

"Thanks, but that wasn't why I was asking. If someone wanted to use large amounts of the stuff against me, would they be able to do so?" Ami clarified her question.

"Certainly. The preparations of the water are relatively inexpensive, and it is only uncommon due to its narrow applicability niche. The need to suppress or dissolve magical items is not a frequent one, and storing the water properly so it maintains its properties can be a bit of a hassle. Nevertheless, if someone was determined to deploy a vast quantity of it for some purpose or other, he could do so without running into insurmountable difficulties."

Ami let out a long, disappointed sigh, as she had been hoping for a different answer. "Thank you." Before Snyder could ask what was wrong, she had already disappeared again. It looked as if she would be forced to bring the fairies over here, where she could create a safer, and warmer, prison for them, after all. Walking through one of the more out-of-the way tunnels while she searched for an appropriate location, she passed a troll, who stopped upon recognising her, and gave her a thumbs up.

"That was a great show, Keeper," he congratulated, his wide grin displaying a sparse set of teeth. "You really played them fairies like fools. They looked as if they really thought they'd win! Hilarious!"

Ami paused in mid-step. "You saw that?" she asked with a sinking feeling.

"Oh yes," the troll nodded enthusiastically, "nearly all of it. Happened to be in the command centre at the time, and the warlocks had put the fight on one of the big screens for everyone to see. The best part was where you blew them all up with their own sealing technique! The expressions on their faces when they realised that they were in over their heads - priceless!" He laughed out loud again and slapped his knees. Being a troll, he didn't have to bend over to do so.

"Everyone saw that?" Ami asked in a small voice.

"Yup. Even that brooding general of yours was giggling all throughout the fight. Only the commander seemed unamused, but then, she only smiles when she's making someone's life miserable during training. Missed a career opportunity as a Dark Mistress, that one."

By now, the blue-haired girl was hiding her face in her palms. *Jadeite saw that? But he would understand what was really going on! Why would he be laughing- oh.* The sheer ludicrousness of her having to fight a group of magical girls hadn't really occurred to her yet. A short smile flitted over her face as she saw the humour in the situation, before her darker mood returned. Well, if Jadeite was already familiar with the situation, he could make himself useful by ferrying the seven prisoners over here.

Dandel woke with a groan, pleasantly surprised at the soft warmth surrounding her, as well as at the fact that she had woken up at all. Her eyes flew open as the full memories of the events before she lost consciousness hit her, and she sat up so fast that her covers slid off the bed. A bed? This wasn't her hammock! Where was she? The indigo-haired fairy's head turned left and right as she took in the details of her surroundings. She was in an elongated room, sitting on the second-to-the-left bed out of a row of seven. The other six were unoccupied, though except for one, they were unmade, as if someone had recently slept in them. Her sisters, she hoped. The tidy bed would of course belong to Cerasse, the neat freak. She

continued her inspection of the surroundings. Candles on candlesticks attached to the smoothed sandstone walls lit the area - wait, walls? There weren't any buildings for several days of travel within the area in which the battle on the iceberg had taken place! Just how long had she been out? The architecture, with its vaulting ceilings, didn't look Imperial either. Clearly, someone had rescued them, but who, and for what reason? Suddenly worried, she looked down at herself, and was relieved that her familiar costume was still in place, even if was slashed in places and stained with coagulated blood. A few experimental stretches revealed that she was fine, except for some stiffness in her limbs and a lingering feeling of tiredness. A sneeze from the adjacent room, whose door was slightly ajar, drew her attention to the low muttering of familiar voices drifting over from there.

Driven by her curiosity and the urgent need to know whether her companions were fine or not, the fae slipped out of the bed, even if she was loath to leave its warmth. Her opinion of the place went up a few notches when her bare feet sank into a thick carpet rather than encountering cold tiles. Their rescuer seemed to be concerned about their comfort, at least. She only hoped there wasn't a price that she wouldn't be willing to pay attached. The door's well-oiled hinges didn't let out a single squeak as she pulled on the handle. In the next room, she found her sisters. Roselle was sitting with the back towards her at a round table, twiddling a little carved white figurine that resembled a horse's head between her right thumb and index finger. Across the table from the orange-haired fae sat Cerasse and Anise, both sporting equally befuddled expressions as they put their violet and red heads together while staring at the pages of a book. Its cover featured a picture of the board game on the centre of the table, which seemed to consist of two sets of sixteen figurines facing each other on a chequered board.

The most likely originators of the sneeze were Melissa and Tilia, who were sitting in a corner, wrapped in blankets and warming their feet in a low vat filled with warm water. They had been the ones to take a plunge into the sea, so if runny noses were the worst they took away from that adventure, they should count themselves lucky. The first one to spot the indigo-haired fairy's entrance was the blonde reclining on the thick carpet in front of the heat-radiating

fireplace, in which a smokeless flame burned.

"Dandel! You are finally awake!" like a bolt of bubbly lightning, the shortest of the fairies crossed the room and wrapped her arms around her eldest sister. This drew the attention of the others, and relieved smiles and joyous greetings were exchanged.

"You looked so tired, so we didn't want to wake you," Roselle explained, brushing orange strands out of her face.

"Yeah, that monster did a real number on you! How are you feeling?"

"Indeed, we were all worried about you! Does anything hurt?"

"Do you know how we got here?"

Dendel fended off the well-meaning stream of questions, finally asserting herself enough to restore a semblance of order. "All right, all right, I'm fine, really! Slow down!" she raised both of her hands, palms facing outward, to physically underline her statement. "First, can you fill me in where we are, how we got here, and who rescued us?"

The room went silent, except for the crackling of the fire. "We don't really know the answer to any of these questions," Camilla was the first to reply.

"Yes, we were hoping you could shed some light on this, because we haven't seen or heard anything from whoever brought us here. Suspicious, if you ask me," the red-headed Anise supplemented.

"At least they seem to be well-intentioned," Roselle ventured. "I mean, look at this place! It's a lot better than the army barracks. And they even provided a game so we wouldn't be bored. That's not exactly menacing behaviour."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," Anise defended her position, "the thing sure is giving me a headache," she continued with a glare at the rulebook.

"Let us not forget the most obvious hint that something is wrong,"

Cerasse added, taking the book from her sister's hand and smoothing out a crease in the paper with near obsessive care. "We are locked in. There's only a hallway leading to the bathroom next door, with metal bars blocking the other exit. Also note the complete absence of our glitter. There must be magic draining wards worked into the masonry."

"That changes things," Dandel commented. "So we are prisoners, even if we are currently being treated more like guests. Hmm. A simply rescue would have been too good to be true. Everyone, stay on our guard."

"Oh, what do we have here? This must be my lucky day!"

The fairies looked at each other. "Who said that?"

"Don't worry, ladies, I will be with you soon!"

"Who are you? Show yourself!" Dandel shouted, taking a combat stance. Her sisters took position around her, so that the fairies stood back to back, forming an outward-facing circle. Their eyes went to the doorless exit when they heard a long, wet slurping noise from outside, which got slowly louder.

"That can't be good!"

The tip of something long, black and green wound its way into the room, pushing up the bottom of the heavy curtain blocking the entrance. "Eeeek! S-Snake!" Melissa's sapphire eyes went wide with fear, and she fluttered into the air, heedless of the ceiling, which, while high, offered nowhere near as much room as the free sky would have. "Oof!" With a bump on her head, the blue haired fairy crashed back down, only avoiding further injury by virtue of Anise jumping to catch her after her fall.

"That's not a snake. For one, they have scales, and for the other, they are not slimy like this thing," the violet-haired Cerasse listed calmly.

"Save the lecture! There's more of them!" Other black-and green ringed worm-like appendages pressed in through the opening, until

the entire entrance was occupied by a forest of gleaming, wriggling pseudopods.

"Not a snake. Just a tentacle monster." Tilia commented in a deadpan tone of voice.

Anise was biting her lower lip in disgust and gulped, which made the bruised skin on her throat bulge. "Tentacle monster! What kind of rescuer keeps a pet like that? Dammit, I wanted to meet a cute prince! Now I'm angry!"

"I strongly object to being called a pet, as I- OW! Hey, sto- OW! "

Valiantly, the redhead had dashed forward and stomped on the foremost probing tentacle, before whacking the main mass with a chair for good measure.

"*Now wait a- YOW!*" The entire rubber-like mass wobbled as the wooden furniture crashed down on it once again.

"CUT IT OUT ALREADY!" With a sudden flurry of activity, Anise felt something slimy wrap around her left ankle, and suddenly found herself suspended upside down in the air, prompting alarmed cries from her sisters. She gulped. This could end badly. She suddenly wished that their outfits offered some more coverage than swimsuits. On the bright side, however, she could make out a few eyes in the centre of the mass from her elevated vantage point, and she still had her chair...

"Much better. Now- OW!"

Back on the ice vessel and armed with the knowledge that the mainland was only about five kilometres away, Ami thought about how to best set foot on the Avatar Islands. With the blockade warship still on the prowl, she had to adjust her original plan for more security than just cruising around would provide. She would have to submerge the iceberg and start digging a tunnel to the continent proper from several hundred metres below sea level. Theoretically, this simply required filling the ship with stone or sand

or other things heavier than ice. She glared at the dripping boulder resting in front of her in the corridor. In practice, she would have to move a few hundred more like it into the ship, and take care to not upset the balance of the vessel. Maybe she shouldn't have made it this big? While the dungeon heart was solidly anchored into the ice and wouldn't be hurt, the engines would do no good if they did no longer point in the right direction. An annoyingly monotonous task that would nevertheless keep her occupied for a while awaited the young Keeper. She wrinkled her nose at the smell originating from the rock. It stank of sulphur and decay, and wouldn't that be fun on a vessel that couldn't refresh its air supply while under water? Pinching her nose shut, she vowed to spend as little time here as possible as she commenced her work.

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Writing Home

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Within an undersea ice grotto, Ami watched her imps splash through the ankle-high water towards the dark opening in the wet-glistening wall. No new water had poured in since she had sealed the gaps between her vessel and the continental shelf it was resting on, which had required a few freezing spells, and now her minions were tirelessly driving a tunnel toward dry land. This place was at the lowest point of her iceberg and formed a sort of diving bell, so even if the seams weren't perfectly tight, the rest of her ship wouldn't be flooded. Ami smiled at everything proceeding as it should. At this rate, the diggers should reach the mainland by morning, and in the meantime, they wouldn't need new orders. She hadn't seen any trace of the blockade ship yet, either, so her dungeon heart should be safe for now. Her face fell a bit at the thought of the soldiers, as it reminded her of the seven captives whom she had reluctantly imprisoned. With their energy restored, they should be awake by now. *"I owe them an explanation, at least,* Ami thought, aware that she had been postponing that uncomfortable task. A quick check with Keeper sight to see if they were all ready, and-The blue-haired girl's eyes seemed to bug out at the sight, and her jaw dropped. A moment later, she disappeared into thin air in a hurry.

The room Ami appeared in resembled a battlefield. The table was overturned, the curtain that had once covered the entrance burned in the fireplace, and the young Keeper tripped over what looked like pieces of a broken chair when she took a step back while looking at the main attraction. Appalled, the teenager stared at the seven shapely female figures restrained in uncomfortable-looking positions by slimy tentacles. The fairies were so completely wrapped up that she could barely make out more than their heads and occasional glimpses of skin. Many of the pseudopodia showed the signs of a great struggle, such as bite marks and charred skin. They twitched and writhed as the trapped women struggled against their bonds, all

the while complaining loudly or moaning and grunting from the effort.

"Let go, damn you!"

"This is so gross!"

"Arghhh! When I get loose you are so dead!"

"Ow! Don't squeeze that!"

"Rook to D4."

Wait, what? Ami's expression of outrage turned into one of puzzled confusion as she blinked at the one detail of the tableau that made no sense in context. The violet-haired fairy was sitting cross-legged on the floor, wrapped up like the others, but seemed in no way alarmed or even uncomfortable. Instead, she was calmly looking at the chess board in front of her, where one of the tentacles slid a pawn forward in response to her move.

Ami took a deep breath, then shouted at the top of her lungs "What is going on here? Release them at once!"

Startled, a few tentacles shot into Ami's direction, but froze the moment the monster recognised its Keeper. As if in embarrassment, they lowered and hid in the main mass. All heads turned to the new arrival, and reactions were mixed.

"Help!"

"Ahh! It's the evil sorceress!"

"Save us!"

The tentacle monster's answer was the least expected. *"I can't! They'll hurt me!"*

Ami's eyes narrowed, and the thing suddenly found itself squeezed by a large, invisible hand. "I'm sure you gave them ample reason to!" She put her arms akimbo as she chided the minion "What were you thinking, molesting the prisoners? You reproduce by budding! You don't even have a gender!"

"Well, they *don't know that. Didn't know that,"* the monster defended itself.

"Actually, I knew that," the violet-haired fairy butted in from her position on the floor.

"Argh! You could have explained that a bit better than just 'Oh, don't worry girls, it just wants to cuddle', Cerasse!" the irritated red-headed fairy complained, imitating the chess-playing fae's breathy tone of voice.

Ami tapped her foot impatiently. "Let them go. Now!"

Reluctantly, the tentacles loosened around their prey and then withdraw quickly as if burned. The monster shifted its bulk rapidly as it covered behind Ami. *"You don't know what they did to me! It was terrible! They tied my tentacles to the chairs and used me as a trampoline! It was only after a monumental struggle that I manage to free myself and-"*

"You still haven't explained what you were doing here in the first place," Ami interrupted, not turning around to look at the blob of pseudopodia and eyes now hiding behind her from the angry fairies glaring in its direction. The seven dishevelled and thoroughly disgusted girls were taking up a defensive position at the other side of the room. It was an unconvincing manoeuvre, because they were at the same time attempting to brush off the slime coating them and to re-adjust their swimsuits where the tentacle beast's efforts had shifted their fabric.

"Oh, I just like fondling prisoners," the thought-voice of the monster explained, *"It's the tasty salt in their sweat, you see, made all more delicious by their fear and revulsion."* Oblivious to the Keeper's darkening expression, it continued *"also, they feel nice and warm and smooth. No horrid hair. Brrr, I hate hair. That former one was so-"*

Ami felt something slimy creep up her lower leg, underneath her black trousers, and her eyebrow started to twitch. With an audible pop of inrushing air, the monster disappeared.

"Huh? Where'd it go?" the redhead fairy asked, shaking her fist. Anise, if Ami remembered her name right. The fairies standing left and right of the brash one looked more worried and put restraining hands on the aggressive fae's shoulders.

With an unpleasant smile, the blue-haired girl answered "Somewhere that should be to its tastes."

Tserk the tentacle monster was briefly stunned by its sudden change of location. One of its eyeballs showed that it was in a prison cell (possibly good), wrapped around someone warm (good), hairless (very good), and scantily dressed (good). However, this initial positive assessment was somewhat ruined by the angrily-blazing yellow eyes (worrisome) set in a red face (meh) over a mouth that bared finger-long fangs (dainty fairy teeth were bad enough). Combine these features with the long, straight horns protruding from the head, however, and the situation went from 'promising' straight into 'oh dark gods save me'-territory.

Note to self: check whether Keeper is in the right mood first next time.

"I'm terribly sorry about this," Ami began, "I didn't know it could squeeze in through the bars." She had her hands clasped in front of her chest while she looked at the wall of hostile faces staring at her with suspicion and distrust from the opposite side of the chamber.

"That thing belongs to you?" the blonde fairy asked unnecessarily.

"Whoever you are, capturing and abducting us could be considered an act of war against the Shining Concord Empire, especially in light of you already trying to run the blockade around the Avatar Islands" the indigo-haired fairy took the lead, "you had better release us before our people come looking for us!"

"Oh, my name is Sailor Mercury," Ami introduced herself, lowering her head in a polite bow, "and I'm afraid that I can't allow you to go. I

apologise for the inconvenience."

"Hold on, hold on. I know I have heard that name somewhere before," the green-haired fairy mentioned, rolling up her emerald eyes as she concentrated. A heartbeat later, she went pale and gasped. "Sailor Mercury, as in super-deviant Keeper Mercury?"

Ami massaged her temples, feeling a headache coming, and coloured slightly. "Just Keeper Mercury, please. Those rumours were all based on misunderstandings."

"You are a Keeper! We have been captured by a Keeper," the blonde fairy yelped, and promptly burst into tears, prompting the orange one to embrace the shaking girl. The other women paled too.

"Monster! You won't get anything from us, even if you try to bribe us with nice accommodations!" Red shouted.

"Anise, don't make her angry," Cerasse cautioned, putting a hand over her more impulsive sister's face.

"No, she's right," Indigo contradicted, and narrowed her eyes at Ami. "We won't betray our comrades or join you!"

Ami felt that she was rapidly losing control of the conversation. "Calm down! Please! The only reason you are here is that you have learned the weakness of my most important weapon. If it wasn't for that, I would have let you go."

"You are lying! You'd just have killed us if that was the case! Why would you give us a nice room like this and heal us up if all you wanted was to keep a secret? Unless- oh no..." Tilia trailed off, going even paler, and cringed away.

"What? What?" the others wanted to know, voices tinged with horrified fascination.

"Y-you know how she's know for her deviance? W-well, how could she p-possibly resist such luscious, beautiful girls like us?"

"Y-you mean...?" Blue fairy gulped, getting the implication faster than her sisters.

The green-haired fairy nodded sadly. "That tentacle monster? Totally not an accident!"

"Now wait a minute!" Ami shouted, face red like a tomato, "you have it all wrong, there is nothing-" she stopped when a ward affixed to her left hand started flashing. "Oh no, why now? Look, I need to go, we'll talk later!"

The scared fairies, two of which were crying and had to be held comfortingly by the others, stayed behind in the devastated room when the blue-haired girl disappeared without an explanation, alone to ponder their bleak-looking future.

Ami appeared in her private chambers, which she had redecorated so that they resembled her room at home as much as possible, even going as far as putting a large picture of what she could remember of the city's skyline where the window would have been. She ignored it and sat down in front of the crystal ball on her desk, which changed to a view of the sacred fire room at the Hikawa shrine. Immediately, she could make out her friends kneeling in front of the fire. Raven-haired Rei in her red-and white shrine maiden robes had her eyes closed and her index fingers put together as she meditated. Usagi was behind her to the right, and wearing her school uniform, staring intently at the flames. Ami's heart leapt in joy when she spotted the sheet of paper covered in large letters on the blonde's lap, and the stack resting next to her. They had caught on to the signalling idea!

Immediately, Ami summoned one of her prepared signs, which indicated that her friends should learn Morse code that so she could send signals by scrying on Rei in different-length intervals, which the other girl would be able to sense without straining herself. She saw Luna whack Usagi with a paw to remind her about taking notes, and read the questions on their board.

"How are you?"

"Where are you?"

"Please come back to us!"

"Why are you working for Jadeite?"

"What happened to your eyes, and why are youma obeying you?"

At the moment, Usagi was scribbling down another question, making Ami squint at the handwriting. "Who were those winged girls earlier? Please don't be evil, remember who you are."

Before answering, Ami showed a few prepared signs of her own "Is everyone all right? How is the fight against the Dark Kingdom going? How is my mother holding up?"

Then, as quickly as she could, she started painting her answers, going over their questions in order. She noted that Rei was already starting to look tired.

"I'm not in immediate danger at the moment, I seem to be in another world, and I'm still searching for a way home. Jadeite was banished from the Dark Kingdom for his failures and is working for me now. The red eyes are because I accidentally bonded with an evil artefact, which gave me the powers and position of -" she paused in her writing for a moment and searched for a simile that her friends would be familiar with "a dark lord, like Sauron. I don't know how to get rid of it yet, and it has come in useful from time to time. The downside is that heroes, like those fairies I was forced to lock up, are trying to kill me, and no amount of arguing will convince them that I'm not evil."

"We are all right, thanks to Tuxedo Mask," Usagi scribbled on her own paper, barely able to concentrate on it between glances at the vision in the fire, "he's helping us out a lot more now, but we really need it! Please try to get back soon! The youma are working differently now and only going after single targets only. Naru was attacked again! I also went to your mother as Sailor Moon and told her you disappeared during one of our fights, and that we are searching for you! She looked so sad. Do you want me to take a message?"At that point, the pig-tailed blonde ran out of space on her sheet and scrambled for a new one. Ami noticed that beads of sweat had formed on Rei's brow, and she was visibly straining under

the effort of maintaining the connection for so long. As much as Ami yearned to continue receiving updates on her loved ones' situation, she had important information that she needed to get across, and reached for a few signs she had prepared in advance."Here is what I learned about the Dark Kingdom from Jadeite. Their goal is finding something called the 'Ginzuishou', a crystal which will allow them to revive their evil goddess, Queen Metallia, and conquer the Earth. Gathering energy serves the same goal, but it's much less effective. The leader of the Dark Kingdom is Queen Beryl, and she has four generals: Jadeite, whom you know. Nephrite's speciality is monsters and attacks derived from astrology, and he has a rivalry with the third general, Zoisite. Jadeite considers the latter the weakest and most vicious of the generals, but he often works together with Kunzite, who is the strongest. Zoisite uses sharp crystals and likes to teleport around a lot, while Kunzite specialises in barriers, reflecting attacks, and manipulating space. The entrance to the Dark Kingdom is apparently located at the North Pole. I'm sorry I can't be of more help right now."

Ami saw Luna's black tail shoot up in excitement at the information, and she said something to Usagi, who scribbled "Luna says that helps a lot and thanks you! Rei's weakening, but we'll get the book you mentioned, I promise! Take care!"

Seeing the transparent picture in the fire fading out, Ami waved with a smile, and then let out an uncharacteristic whoop of joy. She had done it! She had been able to make contact with her friends! Things were looking up. Elated, she was nearly skipping down the corridor when a voice shook her out of her happy thoughts. "Mercury. You are looking happy. Good news?"

Ami froze, then turned around and looked into the handsome face of Jadeite, who gave her a winning smile. Her heart started beating rapidly. *Argh. This silly crush!* Not meeting his eyes, she answered rather brusquely "Yes. I finally managed to communicate with my friends. Was there anything else?"

"No, my Lady, I simply wanted to know what brought such a radiant smile to your face."

"I see. Please get back to your work finding a way home, then," the

blue-haired girl answered, turning away so the man couldn't see her rosy cheeks.

"As you wish," Jadeite bowed and disappeared in a flash of vertical black lines. When the curly-haired dark general reappeared in his own quarters, the pleasant smile on his face was chased away by a vicious snarl that distorted his features. "Dammit!" A black blast of dark energy vaporised an innocent vase as he vented his anger.

Breathing heavily, he balled his fists. Why was he dropping out of favour? A few days ago, Mercury had started avoiding and ignoring him, turning increasingly to her other underlings for assistance and becoming more and more short-spoken during her lessons. Even being at his most polite and charming these last few days had not helped. He had hoped that approaching her while she was in a cheerful mood would make her more receptive to his attempts at re-establishing his position, but there had been no improvement in her reaction. Try as he might, he could not think of anything he had done to earn her ire. The girl struck him as much less whimsical and prone to mood swings than Beryl though, so there had to be some reason for her behaviour. Well, if this wasn't his fault, and not her fault, there remained only one possibility. Someone else was poisoning her mind against him. The dark general furrowed his brows. There weren't that many candidates that had her trust, so finding whoever was responsible shouldn't be too hard. Oh yes, he would get to the bottom of this, and then somebody would pay.

Black, parched earth bulged upward like a molehill, and then burst apart. The metal of a pick peeked out from below, and then a short labourer poked its bug-eyed head out of the hole it had made and hacked away, widening the tunnel exit. Only moments later, Ami appeared, and the imp respectfully scuttled out of the way. The blue-haired girl took in a deep breath of the morning air and immediately wished she hadn't. The atmosphere was foul - that was really the only way to put it. With a snort, Ami put it out of her mind. After her last conversation with the fairies, she needed to put her energy into something more constructive to distract herself. The seven girls were fearful and distrusted her, and even the offer to let them write to their loved ones had done nothing to make them feel better. With

a sigh, Ami put these thoughts aside, and her shadow on the ground separated from her feet when she started levitating. She rose high into the air to see beyond the low ledge that hid this entrance to her dungeon, which was centred on her submarine about five kilometres off the coast to the west.

Floating, Ami got her first good view of the Avatar islands from this elevated vantage point. What she saw shocked her. She had thought that the references to Boris' homeland being an outpost of hell now had been hyperbole. She was surrounded on all sides by sulphurous wastelands and blackened rock formations, broken up only by patches and rivulets of lava that gaped like open, bloody wounds in the landscape. Far away in the distance, she could make out the scorched ruins of a once proud aqueduct, looking surprisingly intact even after fifteen years. But then, there was no vegetation, no nature trying to reclaim the land. Even the cawing of the crows had fallen silent over the years, and Ami couldn't spot a living thing as far as the eye could see. Her gaze wandered upward to the sky that looked like a smouldering furnace. The clouds glowed in tones ranging from rust-red to a poisonous yellow, and swirled around in a giant spiral whose eye was located over some feature of the island that she couldn't see due to the dust. It was everywhere, but more pronounced in the valleys, where it formed impenetrable fog banks.

The senshi boggled. This was what the corruption from dungeon hearts would lead to in the end? Not even the ocean was spared! Its waves were yellow and brackish, and its ground rose to form jagged, needle-like reefs. This was terrible! She needed a way to control or work around this, or otherwise, she would do as much damage as the regular Keepers when she went after them. Finding out how hero dungeon hearts worked had become more important than ever. She still didn't know where to find one, but the abandoned-looking dungeon that her minions had located nearby - the reason for this choice of landing location - was a good starting point.

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Dungeon Discoveries

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The layer of dry old dust on the ground softened the sound of Ami's footsteps as she wandered through the old tunnels. In places, it was so thick that she couldn't even make out the floor tiles underneath. Nobody had walked through these halls in years, that much was clear from even a cursory inspection. Torchlight sparkled on the icy curves of the young Keeper's golem body as she advanced cautiously through the corridors, well aware that the presence of burning torches meant that, abandoned or not, this place still contained an active dungeon heart somewhere. Which meant that any remaining traps would probably still be functional too, and that the Keeper whom the dungeon belonged to could potentially detect her intrusion at any moment. If she gave him a reason to check in on it, at least. Given that Ami hadn't encountered anything of the least value during her exploration yet, she felt relatively safe.

Through her visor, she watched the remains of yet another smashed door that had once blocked a doorway. The entire situation made little sense to her, increasing the feeling of unease she had for being on another Keeper's territory. One she probably should get used to, as most of the territory on the Avatar Islands seemed claimed. But why wasn't she encountering anyone in that case? And if someone had stormed this dungeon and killed everyone, why did they leave the dungeon heart intact? Brushing away some cobwebs blocking her path, Ami instinctively flinched away from the little crumbled-up spider corpse that fell out of it and into her frozen hair. Feeling rather silly, she stepped into the room beyond. It was empty, aside from more dust-covered skeletons. Orcs and some trolls, from the looks of it. Her visor beeped, magnifying the indentations on the bleached bones. Tooth marks. They had been gnawed on? Not only that, Ami discovered when she knelt down next to one of the piles of bones and looked at a long, white femur more closely. It had been broken in the middle, and the marrow had been sucked out. Cannibalism? Ami vaguely remembered hearing something about a terrible famine a short time after the last resistance was crushed by the forces of

darkness. So everyone had died of hunger in the end? Why hadn't the dungeon's chicken farms provided enough sustenance?

Shuddering and feeling queasy at the thought of what must have happened during those final days, the possessed simulacrum continued her inspection of the dungeon. Another room. More gaping emptiness. Had the Keeper just transmuted all of his rooms back into gold and packed up? But why? It was possible to turn mana into gold, albeit inefficient to do so. Still, even without her own boosted power reserves, sustaining a dungeon should have been feasible outside of combat situations. Also, why leave an active heart behind? Sure, it would maintain its claim on the land and prevent other Keepers from raising a new heart in its territory, but leaving it without guards seemed like an awfully risky move. Something wasn't adding up. Ami shifted her concentration back on the sensor readout. It was directing her toward the dungeon heart, whose muffled beating was the only sound aside from her footsteps that disturbed the tomb-like silence of these underground tunnels. She stopped suddenly, ceased all movement, and listened. No, that wasn't quite true. There was another low, faraway noise. A long, drawn-out roar just on the edge of perception, swelling to a crescendo before cutting off completely. That- that had sounded like a bellow? She wasn't alone here, but what could have made that noise? A dragon maybe? Ami waited for the sound to repeat itself, with her palmtop open and ready, but gave up after five minutes of nothingness.

Well, whatever it was, she would have her crew scry for it. Due to the diligent work of her warlocks, she had finally overcome the limitation of having to communicate via imps scribbling her orders with chalk on slate. In hindsight, the solution had been obvious. She already had one-way communication devices that looked like giant eyeballs on a stalk, and adapting their magic to a real eye hadn't been too difficult. Though there had been a few gruesome accidents during the development phase when the spell was being tested on chickens, or so she had been told. With a quick, near-triangular arcane gesture, she invoked the communication cantrip, and could feel the tell-tale tingle in her left eye that indicated that the magic had taken hold. *"I heard a sound that could only come from another creature. From my readings, it must be somewhere in the lower*

levels. Please start looking for it."

"Understood, Keeper. We will inform you as soon as we have found it," a voice in Ami's mind replied. The alchemist, maybe? It was so hard to tell with the distortion caused by the spell.

Traversing yet more cavernous, empty, and thoroughly uninteresting caverns, the ice girl finally stumbled across one of the more interesting features of the dungeon, and narrowly avoided losing a leg to it. Lying flat on her back, the girl stared wide-eyed at the blade that whooshed overhead at knee height, disappearing into a near-invisible slit that looked just like the other seams between bricks, and reappearing from it as it spun around. Only the icy nature of her body had saved her from serious removing the limbs outright. Puzzled, Ami crept out from under the spinning circle of death and examined it more closely. The trap fell back into a slumber once she was out of striking range. How curious, she had been scanning for things like that? Oh, it didn't match the expected search patterns because it wasn't powered directly by the dungeon heart, but had its own reservoir. Glittering fingers flickered over the keyboard of the Mercury computer, adjusting search parameters. A moment later, the entire corridor in front of Ami's visor lit up with warnings. "Oh dear."

Rather than rushing into the killzone and overwhelming the traps with numbers, as she had done in Malleus' dungeon, Ami analysed the detected obstacles, searching for a safe path through them. She wasn't pressed for time on this excursion, after all, and storming through the danger with a troop of golems seemed like the best way to attract enemy attention. However, she soon found out that there simply was no such thing as a safe passage through the overlapping layers of sharp, spinning bits, pits, and magical devices. She shrugged and put her computer away. If subtlety didn't work...

"Shabon Spray Freezing!"

...then coating the walls, floor, and ceiling with a layer of ice that would prevent the traps from striking at her would have to do. Ami nodded at the sight of the first few frozen metres of the passage, and put her foot down on it. Immediately, she heard a cacophony of ringing and scraping noises as blades and spears sprang from their

positions, only to get stuck in the ice. The formerly clear mass turned a milky white as networks of small fractures spread out from the impact points, but the cover seemed to hold. In one place on the ceiling, the ice was glowing and melting around a rod that discharged lightning bolts, but it ran out of power before it could get at its intended victim. Satisfied that her ploy was working, Ami proceeded to freeze over the next section of the corridor.

Ten minutes later, the Ami-golem stepped into a larger chamber whose outer perimeter was free of traps. She was only half as tall as she had started out with, because one of the traps had unexpectedly expended all of its power in one shot, turning the tunnel into a blizzard of ricochetting high-velocity ice shards that took big sections out of the simulacrum, but she had managed to regenerate from the injuries. Right now, she was surveying the new room, turning her attention to the central dais. From each of the square structure's edges, a stone pillar reached toward the ceiling, and five steps led up to the central platform on each side. Taking a note of the traps guarding each of these four approaches, Ami turned her attention to the large, pulsing crystal orb resting on the back of three life-sized troll statues, which stood on top of the raised dais. The large hall brightened and dimmed whenever the beautiful white crystal in its golden casing, topped with a large turquoise gem, did. It took Ami a moment to realise what she was looking at, so different was it from her expectation.

"I-Impossible!" With her mouth wide open, the senshi stared at the device that pulsed in concert with the thunderous heartbeat echoing through the tunnels. How could this be a dungeon heart? It wasn't even alive! Where was the pool of dark power resting within? Not a single mote of greenish mana in sight! This looked like a mere artefact, not an unholy amalgamation of stone and living flesh. At this point, Ami's thoughts screeched to a halt as she considered the implications. It wasn't alive. It wasn't a hero dungeon heart, but it wasn't alive. It didn't need a Spark of Life from the dark gods to create! So this was why heroes could have one? Bubbling with excitement, the teenager started deep-scanning the device, taking in every detail as she stepped slowly around it along the trap-free

perimeter of the room. Possibly a space to muster the defenders, she thought while she recorded the incoming data. No black-box component from the dark gods meant that she could probably bar them access, if she could only reverse-engineer this artefact. There were definitely similarities to her own type of dungeon heart, but also vast differences. Still, she had three living-type dungeon hearts originating from different Keepers, all with their own little divergences in some aspects. Now she had a fourth sample of an entirely new type. If she compared their differences and similarities and took Malleus' knowledge about dungeon heart construction into account, she could probably come up with a working model for this one. Eyes burning with determination, Ami dismissed her computer. She would have to return home and process the data. The golem went still when a red-eyed shadow poured out of it and disappeared through the ceiling. Statue-like, the construct would not move again until it received new orders, or until its owner possessed it once more.

"No. Absolutely not! You will not neglect your training just because you may have found a way to avoid this duel entirely. It may yet turn out to be a dead end." Cathy was dragging a reluctant blue-haired teenager toward the training room.

"But- very well." Ami's shoulders sagged, but she admitted that the older woman had a point. Finding out how to make the new dungeon heart was a potentially long-term project, and the date of the duel was getting closer and closer. There were still nearly two months left, but she had no time to waste. "Say, did the warlocks find the other creature in that dungeon?"

The long-haired blonde nodded once. "Yes, they know where it is, but not what it is. Its chamber is pitch-black, so they can't see a thing. However, it's at the very bottom of a collapsed shaft, so it probably won't get out unless its Keeper returns and frees it manually." She took one of the wooden training weapons from a rack on the wall and handed it to Mercury, who plodded toward the central arena. Cathy called her back. "Wait, no dragon for you today. Go change into your armour and wait for me."

Ami threw the swordwoman a questioning glance but complied and slipped into one of the changing areas, but was quite surprised to see that the blonde disappeared into one of the stalls too. From the rustling and clanging of metal, she judged that Cathy was putting on some kind of armour of her own. After the imp assisting her had tightened the last strap on her - entirely nonmagical - breastplate, Ami stepped out to face her instructor. She heard more metallic noises, followed by a muffled curse when something fell over. There was more rattling, and then the scar-faced blonde stepped out from behind the curtain, carrying a strange skull-like black helmet in her hand. She was still wearing a Sailor Mercury uniform, though. Ami wondered where this was going.

"Ta-da!" Cathy pulled the curtain aside, revealing Ami's opponent for today.

"A life-sized stuffed Reaper puppet?" Ami blinked at the towering construct that just reeked of shoddy craftsmanship. The general dimensions and shape were right, but the skin was a patchwork of mismatched leather scraps, and the head was swinging left and right on a large spring. Ami could see some metal gleaming beneath the seams in its covering. All in all, the looming figure looked more like a zombie than the red demon currently imprisoned in one of the cells. It didn't help that one of the yellow buttons serving as its eyes had already fallen off. If the real Reaper saw this caricature, he would certainly lose his temper. "Are we going to practice aiming for vital spots?" the blue-haired girl ventured a guess.

"Not exactly," Cathy grinned. It was the wide, slightly manic grin that usually preceded a particularly painful learning experience, and Ami wondered again what the woman was up to.

"That," the blonde pointed at her frankenstein, "is a version of the prototype armour I asked your minions to custom-build."

"We haven't solved the power issue yet," Ami cautioned, eyeing the sinister construct more warily now.

The swordswoman waved her hand dismissively. "Well, I only have to actually wear the helmet to control it, so I just told Snyder to cram the inside full with all the mana batteries that would fit. It still only

has power for about forty heartbeats, but during that time, it will be the best approximation of your opponent that you'll be able to get."

Oh joy. Ami watched the blonde raise the black helmet with both hands and put it over her head. From within, her voice shouted "Ready? Go!"

The mechanical monstrosity straightened and raised its wooden scythe. Suddenly, it looked much less ridiculous to Ami, who fell into a guarded combat stance. "Wait! Aren't I supposed to only fight him while wearing powered armour too?" Clanking and rattling like an entire shelf of tableware falling over, the frankenstein barrelled down on the much smaller and lighter girl who stood her ground until the last moment. The scythe whistled through the air in a devastating downward arc, long before the monster was in Ami's striking range. It had that much reach?! The girl threw herself aside, cheating by using her flight ability to avoid a fall to the ground. The ruse bought her just enough time to interpose her own weapon between herself and the puppet's follow-up strike. A bone-shattering impact later, the two-hander was ripped from her grasp by the force of the blow, its handle splintering as it screeched over her metal-covered palms. A strong, painful punch into her armoured chest drove the air out of her lungs, reminded her that staring in wonder at her suddenly empty palms during a battle was a bad idea, lifted her off her feet, and slammed her hard into the wall. Everything went black.

With a bump on her head, Ami was reclining in a comfortable chair in the living room, using the free time she had gained from the abbreviated training session in a productive way by staring into the crystal ball on her lap. The image within showed Usagi staring at a sheet covered in Morse signs. Her tongue was peeking out at one corner of her mouth as she frowned in concentration, one finger tracing the lines in the book in front of her as she searched for the right translation. Next to the book sat Luna, her tail twitching as she double-checked the pigtailed blonde's work. Rei was sitting nearby with a pen, carefully taking notes of the intervals during which Ami was looking in on them. Blink. The crystal ball went inert. Ami counted to three, then renewed her scrying efforts. She was keeping a slow conversation going, mainly answering her friends' questions.

They had a much easier time asking her things than the other way around. After all, she could just read what they were writing on a paper. This wasn't too bad an arrangement, the blue-haired girl judged. There were things she didn't necessarily want to burden her friends with, such as the way she had acquired most of her Keeper knowledge, or the upcoming duel. If her plans for the new dungeon heart panned out, she wouldn't even have to fight, and she didn't want to worry them for nothing. It wasn't as if they could help her either way.

One uncomfortable topic that came up again and again was Jadeite, on Luna's insistence, Ami suspected. Not that Usagi and Rei seemed very enthused by the fact that he was working for her now. Both were urging her to exercise caution, as she didn't really know what he was plotting. Even from her crush-befuddled perspective, she could see that they had a point. She had no idea what his motives were, and while the dungeon heart ensured a minimum of loyalty, his plans and aspirations remained a great unknown. It was quite negligent, wasn't it? Maybe she should ask him, out of professional interest, of course. Far be it from her to want to know more about the man she was crushing on for personal reasons.

"Jadeite!"

The grey-uniformed dark general shimmered into existence, one arm held over his chest as he bowed politely. "Lady Mercury, you summoned me?" His eyebrows rose at seeing the young Keeper with a glowing crystal ball in front of her, sitting in a chair large enough that it could have qualified as a throne. The involuntary associations were unpleasant.

"Yes," Ami replied shortly, continuing to peer into the orb. "What are you planning?" Well, the choice of words may not have been the best one, but half her attention was still on the image in her scrying device.

"Pardon me?" Any satisfaction at having finally been called by Mercury outside of their regularly-scheduled lessons evaporated at these words. What did she mean? She couldn't be suspecting him of plotting against her, could she? Whoever was machinating against him was working fast. Uh oh. Wrong answer. She was frowning now.

Ami peered into the crystal ball once again, furrowing her brows in concentration as she tried to decipher Usagi's handwriting. It was well worth the effort, as sending a request for clarification would take much longer.

Jadeite shifted nervously on his legs at the continued silence. What was he supposed to say if he wasn't even sure what he was being accused of? Finally, the blue-haired girl looked up, only meeting his eyes for a moment. "I wanted to know what your ambitions are," she clarified. "I can't imagine that serving me figured prominently in your plans for the future."

"Yet serve I will," the curly-haired blond answered, "there are worse fates than being the right-hand man of the future ruler of the world."

Ami coughed and blushed lightly. "Ahem, I don't really plan to conquer the world," she replied, secretly wondering whether admitting that wasn't a great mistake.

"I doubt you will have a choice in the matter," Jadeite answered, fighting hard to keep a smirk from appearing on his face.

Ami cocked her head. "Explain."

Good, she was in full-attention lesson-absorbing mode now. However, her eyes were burning a brighter red now, denoting irritation. Being the focus of that intense stare when it was displaying more emotion than just academic interest was disconcerting. Choosing his words carefully, the dark general continued "Well, you are already planning to defeat the other Keepers in this world, which means conquering the underground, at least. And I won't insult your intelligence by assuming that you think the surface-dwellers will not come after you once you attempt that. Which will lead to you having to defeat them too," he explained.

Ami nodded once, her lips turning into a displeased downward-turned arc, and her head remaining more inclined than before.

Raising his white-gloved hands, Jadeite continued "Also, frankly speaking, if you think that your senshi friends back in the other world are achieving anything more than fighting a delaying action, you are

deluding yourself!"

Ami's eyes flashed a bright red. "I trust in them!" she barked, glowering at the blond.

"No doubt," Jadeite stated in a conciliatory tone of voice. "But you have to face the facts. Eventually, the Dark Kingdom will manage to scrounge up enough energy to revive their Great Ruler, and then nothing will be able to stand before them. And should the other senshi go on the offensive before then, well, look around you," he spread his arms and turned slowly in place to encompass the entire dungeon in the gesture, "how well do you think they would do against your forces?"

The glow in Mercury's eyes dimmed, and her head sank at the realisation that her troops alone would give her friends great trouble. Add in the dragon and Jadeite, and their chances would be so small as to be near-inexistent.

"Exactly. And there are many more youma, who are also individually more powerful, in the Dark Kingdom. Any attack would be doomed to failure. But," he approached the seated girl, grinning confidently, "you have managed to catch Metallia's interest. Me being here proves that. Gain her favour so she makes you the one in charge once she awakens and takes over the world, leaving *dear* queen Beryl out in the cold. You have the vast advantage that no annoying senshi would get in our way while harvesting enough life energy! Just give the word, and I'll get to it."

"That- that's monstrous!" The red glow was back with a vengeance.

"It is the only way to save yourself and your friends," the dark general contradicted, crossing his arms. "Not to mention myself. Beryl will be displeased, to say the least, once she discovers that I escaped her punishment."

"There must be another way," Ami insisted, tightening her grip on the crystal ball until her knuckles went white. "So," she continued, "that's it? You are here for status and because you think I'm your best shot at survival?"

"Is this a problem?" Jadeite asked, looking directly into the dimming embers that were the blue-haired girl's eyes.

Mercury was silent for the time needed to take a long breath. "No," she admitted, "your work has been to my full satisfaction so far, aside from that one time where you kidnapped Baron Leopold."

Jadeite could hear a hint of sadness in her voice. Was she disappointed that she couldn't chew him out? No, that seemed unlike her. Strange. In any case, it was time to re-gain some ground while she wasn't pretending he didn't exist. "Likewise. It is a refreshing change to serve a ruler who appreciates my skills and who seems genuinely interested in improving her abilities," he complimented. "And you are much more pleasant to be around than Beryl ever was," he added with a bow.

Ami's vision went strangely pink-tinted. *He thinks I'm pleasant to be around! Arghh! Stupid hormones!* Nearly deafened by the thumping of her fast-beating heart, she said "Thank you. You have given me much to think about. Please leave me to my contemplations." When the man bowed again and teleported out, she felt contradicting emotions. Disappointment at him leaving, and relief that he hadn't noticed her rapidly-reddening cheeks. Why did her life have to be so complicated? She looked down at the crystal ball in her lap. She had better inform her friends that she was all right before they worried themselves sick about her suddenly dropping out of the conversation. How much she should share about what she had learned, she didn't know.

A day later, Ami appeared in front of the cell block housing her fairy prisoners, and blinked at the sights. Sitting in front of the new, more tightly spaced bars sat the tentacle monster. This wasn't entirely unexpected, even if she tried to discourage such behaviour. The cause of the senshi's astonishment was the violet-haired fairy sitting on the other side, enveloped by a few of the thin pseudopods that had squeezed through the barrier and wrapped around her lithe body. Noticing the Keeper's arrival and round-eyed stare, Cerasse looked up from the chess board and shrugged, making the tentacle resting on her shoulders hop with a wet smacking noise. "It's the

only decent player around," she offered as explanation. At Ami's continued silence, she continued "Oh, come on. You are hardly in the position to talk about odd habits."

"Baseless rumours founded on misunderstandings," the blue-haired girl muttered on reflex. A redhead, alerted by her voice, pulled aside the curtain to the fairies' living room and planted herself in the opening, arms akimbo.

"Cerasse! Are you playing with that filthy thing again? Just because you haven't won yet doesn't mean-" noticing Mercury, the fae shot her a glare. "Oh, it's you, *Keeper*. What brings you here today? Got a new plan to seduce us to your side?"

Her statement caused more heads in all colours of the rainbow to appear in the doorway, wearing curious expressions. "Just checking up on you. Are you all right? Nobody is sick or needs anything?"

"Aside from our freedom?" the indigo-haired Dandel asked bitterly.

Ami sighed. "I have already explained to you why I can't let you go."

"Oh, right, it would get in the way of your evil ambitions," Anise sneered. Ami hung her head and leaned against the wall, letting out another long sigh. Why couldn't they understand that she wasn't doing this for fun, and was genuinely trying to keep them as happy as she could? There were more pleasant things she could be spending her time on, like daydreaming about a certain general...

"Hey, look at her! That's exactly the same longing expression that Dandel always has when she's pining after some boy!" the blonde fairy mocked, pointing her index finger at Ami.

"Hey!" Indigo fairy protested.

Orange fairy leaned forward, narrowing her eyes "Oh, look, she's blushing! Could that guess have been right?"

"Why so depressed, Keeper? Bile demon rejected your advances?" green-haired Tilia jibed.

Anise pushed her sister aside. "Pining after a handsome troll?"

"Went after a dragon, but he liked it?" the blue-haired fairy joined in the heckling.

"For the last time, I'm not interested in monsters! Those rumours were all started by a bunch of goblins who completely misinterpreted the situation!" Ami protested.

"Prove it!" the fairies chorused.

"Yeah! Show us what he looks like!" Camille demanded, bouncing up and down so excitedly that blonde bangs escaped from behind her tiara.

Ami considered this harder than she should have. Doing so would be childish and stupid, but on the other hand, if it got them to shut up about her alleged preferences, it could be worth it. Besides, they were imprisoned and had never met Jadeite, so what harm could it do? She really wished she could have some normal girl talk, and why not with the fairies? Rei and Usagi would just worry more about her if she told them about her crush, and talking to Cathy, Jered, or Snyder about something like that would be horribly embarrassing. Jadeite himself was right out, for obvious reasons. Against her better judgement, she conjured a reasonably accurate picture of the curly-haired general and handed it through the bars. The fairies immediately huddled around the picture.

"Ohhh. Handsome!"

"Eww, don't lean on me, Cerasse! You are all slimy!"

"The evil Keeper is after a charming hero! Poor guy!"

"Ha! Someone dreamy like that would never give a Keeper the time of the day, much less fall in love with one!" Roselle proclaimed, causing her sisters to make agreeing noises.

Irrationally annoyed at their dismissal of her chances, Ami couldn't help but boast in a calm voice "Oh, is that so? He's already working for me."

"No way!"

"There must be black magic involved!"

"Think what you want," the teenage Keeper replied, feeling somewhat smug, and telekinetically retrieved her picture, much to the disappointment of the other women.

"If that's true, send him our way," the orange-haired fairy demanded with a wink, prompting her sisters to giggle.

Ami pouted, feeling a pang of jealousy, and already regretted telling them anything at all. Why again had she thought that would be a good idea? "Unfortunately, that won't be possible. I'll be back tomorrow, so if you think of anything you are missing in the meantime, you can let me know then." She disappeared, oblivious to the fairies putting their heads together and starting to exchange hurried whispers. "So we have another objective when we break out," Melissa began, "find that handsome guy and undo whatever evil mind control she has put him under." The others giggled and nodded in agreement.

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Research Breakthroughs

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Deep in the dungeon's vaults, groups of lumpish trolls and robed warlocks lurked within the shadowy alcoves of Mercury's spacious workshop. Wreathed in darkness, they watched as their Keeper entered the brightly-lit centre of the room. It was illuminated by five burning braziers standing at each point of a pentagram and lighting the way for the black-dressed girl as she approached the fruits of her minions' labour. Laid out on an obsidian bier in the centre of the magical diagram was a glistening suit of armour, bulkier than Ami, but just the right size for her. The design of the troll-wrought suit of plate mail seemed more sinister than what she had expected. Bent protrusions arched around the armour's chest, growing organically from the metal and surrounding it like an external ribcage. Similar protrusions ran along the lengths of the arms and legs, suggesting the shape of the bones below. The helmet resembled a skull, underlining the general skeletal appearance of the ensemble.

At least they didn't lacquer it black, Ami thought while gazing at her distorted reflection, which peered back at her from within the metal with red eyes. "Function influences form?" She asked the head warlock, the same black-bearded individual who had offered his services for restoring the destroyed portal.

"Yes, in order to fully exploit the law of similarities, it is preferable that the armour resembles the skeleton that the foundations of its controlling magic are based on," he explained, following the young Keeper with his eyes as she walked around the construct and examined it from all angles. She touched her right earring, and the wondrous magical glasses the dark wizard had seen her wear on occasion appeared, lighting up with strange symbols. She removed the helmet and peered into the hollow within, inspecting the runic inscriptions.

The techniques applied to the creation of this suit involved more necromancy than Ami had ever wanted to know. "Alloying powdered

bone from multiple sources to the steel got rid of the stubbornness that slowed down the proto-golem's reactions?"

The warlock inclined his head. "Yes, it was as you suspected. However, the magic now demands a sacrifice of a drop of the user's blood to surrender complete control."

"An acceptable drawback, if everything else works as planned," Ami commented. *So far, so good.* She turned her attention to the array of circular depressions lining the interior of the breastplate. "I am impressed with your work so far." She turned to face the warlock again, and asked the one question he had been dreading "How long can it work on full power?"

"Ah, well," he wiped some sweat away that had gathered in his bushy eyebrows, "rather short with the available mana batteries, but if we had access to higher quality ones, we could conceivably extend operation time to nearly a full minute." Afraid of being reduced to a smoking scorch mark on the ground by an angered Keeper any second now, he hurriedly continued "However, we could make it run much longer if you demanded slightly poorer performance. What could the armour possibly face that would require its current abilities?"

A horned reaper boosted with copied sailor senshi enhancements, that's what, Ami replied in her head. *Good that those seem to be additive, rather than multiplicative, judging from Cathy and me both getting a similar increase in physical ability out of them.* Out loud, she said "That won't do. Install this, too." Out of thin air, she produced a sapphire disc that was about as big as her palm, carved with symbols so delicate that they were hard to read without a magnifying glass, and that hummed with power.

The head warlock looked at it, raising an eyebrow in puzzlement. "What is this, my Keeper?"

"A remote mana tap linked directly to the dungeon heart. That should solve the power issue." *Provided that Azzathra doesn't cut the flow, and that it doesn't explode. Snyder was trying hard with the items he made, and he was getting better, but prudence demanded stress-testing the thing for a while before she activated it anywhere*

near her body.

Ami handed the component over to her employee, who took it reverently. "It shall be done."

Jadeite's classroom did not have much equipment in it that Ami hadn't provided herself. That meant that aside from her desk and a bookshelf in the corner, it was mostly bare. The dark general had the enviable ability to turn the place into whatever he needed for the lesson, and it would return to its natural state once he stopped maintaining the glamour-based magic. Most of Ami's previous experience with the technique was being on the receiving end of it while investigating some of his plots that required a shop or similarly specialised environments. She could replicate it with her Keeper powers and fabrication spell, but it took much longer, and the results were permanent. *I wonder if he can teach me that glamour magic too. Whoops!* One of the three boulders she was levitating swerved out of position and collided with another, causing both to drop to the ground.

The crashes drew Jadeite's attention. "Hmm. And you were doing so well, too," he commented and noticed that the girl's cheeks started to burn. With shame? *That wasn't really a harsh reprimand,* the dark general thought, puzzled. *She can't have that low self-esteem, can she? That blonde thug does far worse during her lessons on a regular basis. Strange.*

He's looking at me, and here I am, messing up an easy exercise like this! And he still says I was doing well! Ami looked at the floor, gritting her teeth in irritation at her oh-so-inconvenient emotions. *You are being silly! Calm down and just act normally!* It didn't help at all that Jadeite was now walking around her with his hands behind his back and eyeing her speculatively.

Maybe she doesn't care because she accepts that physical combat isn't her strength, but she measures her worth by how well she does in more scholastic pursuits? Is that what I'm doing wrong? To the steely-eyed blond, that seemed like an increasingly likely theory, as his efforts to find out who was plotting against him had come up

entirely empty. The swordswoman and Jered both had opportunities to be alone with Mercury during their respective combat lessons, but neither had taken advantage of that while he had been spying on them. The acolyte was happy enough to fade into the background and not be bothered by the other denizens of the dungeons, and wouldn't try to get a position that would put him more in the spotlight. None of the other minions had enough contact with the senshi to be worthy of consideration.

"W-what are you doing?" Ami asked, flustered by the man's scrutiny.

"Hmm, yes, I think you are ready. Your body is sufficiently conditioned for using dark energy now to safely attempt a teleport."

"Really?" the colour drained from the blue-haired girl's face. She still remembered what had happened to the poor imp she had possessed for her first try, before she had started taking lessons.

"Yes," Jadeite gave her a winning smile, "your energy channels have developed enough now to handle feedback generated by a failed attempt without permanent harm. In the worst case scenario, you will give yourself a nasty shock and be out for a day or so. We will minimise the danger by keeping the distance, and therefore the involved power, low."

"Are you sure?" Ami asked shyly, and at the curly-haired general's nod, her face set into a mask of determination. This was why she had started taking her lessons, after all.

Good. Some positive reinforcement seems to achieve results. I'll need to watch what I say more. "You do remember the procedure, right? Try moving yourself from your current position to that corner of the room. Begin when you are ready." Jadeite stepped aside and watched the girl brace herself. She closed her eyes in concentration, and, with her mouth open, took three long, calming breaths. A short-lived grimace betrayed the exact moment she gathered enough courage to attempt the spell. There was a flash of blue, and a twister of snowflakes swirled around the spot where Mercury had just disappeared. Looking good- wait, there was something else amidst the dissipating whiteness. Jadeite stared at the black-and-gold objects drifting apart and landing on the floor.

"Eep!" Came a strangled exclamation from the corner.

The curly-haired general resisted the urge to turn his head and look, and valiantly fought his rising urge to snicker. "A near-perfect first try," he commented, coughing once to when a chuckle threatened to overwhelm his self-control. With iron discipline, he kept his eyes on the scattered clothing, "but you may wish to take your outfit along on the next try. The problem was an overly specific focus on yourself, I assume." Noises of hurried movement behind him made him wish to give in to his curiosity, but he couldn't risk all the progress he had made by embarrassing the girl more. Young as she was, there probably wasn't much interesting to see yet, anyway. Valiantly, his stare remained fixed on the items on the floor. Something normally hidden caught his eye, and he blinked in surprise. *Leather?*

Ami's private lab was so secret that it didn't even have an entrance and could only be reached by teleportation. On the shelves, tidily-arranged miniatures of dungeon hearts and parts thereof rested between neatly-stacked notes. A magical circle in a free corner kept dust and other contaminants away from her workbench, where strangely-symmetric crystals formed half-finished shells that rested in filigree fixtures. Life in the dungeon was only loosely coupled to the surface world's day and night cycle; nevertheless, Ami stifled a yawn as she peered at the screen flickering in front of her. In its light, the pallor of her features became even more pronounced. She probably should have gone to bed hours ago, but this was work she couldn't delegate to her assistants. Some knowledge was simply too dangerous for them, and she would not let information about dungeon heart construction fall into their hands if she could help it. Slowly but surely, she was assembling schematics and compiling them into a greater whole that approached viability. The active heart in the nearby abandoned dungeon had been a great source of information, and for the last week, she had possessed the golem she left behind nearly every evening to compare her simulations to the artefact's internal structure.

Two days ago, the golem had no longer been there when she had tried to make contact. She didn't know who or what had destroyed it, but at least she had learned that some Keeper on the islands was

still checking up on things once in a while. She had accordingly doubled the defences in the tunnel leading to her ice ship and made it ready to disembark at a moments notice. Ami rubbed her eyes and returned to staring at the diagrams and equations on her screen. Losing access to the exemplar of the new dungeon heart type was inconvenient, but she had enough data to continue her research. Maybe if she tweaked these parameters just so-

"Mercury."

The blue-haired girl flinched at the sudden and unexpected interruption, and it took her distracted mind a moment to place the voice. Leaning forward over her palmtop to hide its screen, she looked over her shoulder and shouted "Jadeite! What are you doing here? This place is off-limits!"

The blond looked at the trinkets displayed around the room curiously, and answered "Making sure you don't waste away. You missed breakfast."

Ami looked at the sandwiches on the tray he was holding. Her hand went to her mouth in surprise. "It's that late already?" Lowering her head, she said in a soft voice. "Th-thanks. Just leave it on the desk." *Does he care?*

Jadeite stepped closer, and the girl was suddenly aware that they were all alone in this room. "You didn't sleep at all, did you? Take a break and get some rest. You look overworked."

The dark circles under Ami's eyes agreed with his assessment. "Sorry, but I am so close to a breakthrough that I insist on continuing this. Please leave."

The dark general narrowed his eyes at the back of her head when she returned her gaze on her work, but bowed anyway. Before he disappeared, he saw her hand reach absently toward the plate with food.

His sour-looking silhouette shimmered into existence in the dining room, where the three people sitting around the table ceased their conversation and looked at him expectantly.

"Back already?" Cathy asked.

Jadeite pulled out his chair and sat down, crossing his arms in front of his chest.

"From Mercury's absence and the way you are pouting, I can already see how much of a success your attempt to coax her toward joining us was," Jered commented and took a sip of tea.

"I do not pout," Jadeite growled, frowning at the green-shirted man.

"Indeed, indeed. So what did she say she was working on?" Snyder wanted to know.

The dark general's frown deepened. "She didn't give me enough time to ask any questions before dismissing me, but said she was making progress." His fingers drummed across the wood of the table while he reflected on what happened. Focusing on Cathy, he said "I just don't understand her. You nearly kill her with your weird ideas of training on a daily basis, but she continues treating you like a friend. I am nothing but polite and supportive, and she barely even talks to me, even while I tutor her!"

The swordswoman was still chewing, so Snyder took it onto himself to answer instead. "Well, Cathy isn't evil."

"Yes. And the two of you have quite some unpleasant history, if I recall correctly. It's no wonder she doesn't like you," Jered added.

The swordswoman looked at her two companions incredulously, then gulped down her food and faced Jadeite. "That's not it at all. Your problem is that she likes you a bit too much."

"Oh yes, your mockery is just what I need," the dark general dismissed her statement, scowling. *Why again did I expect them to be actually helpful?*

"Fine, be that way," Cathy said, leaning back with a mischievous glint in her eyes. "I'm sure figuring out the thought processes of a young girl like her will not be complicated at all for a great and powerful general like you."

With a little growl from the back of his throat, Jadeite disappeared in a teleportation flash, leaving his half-eaten breakfast behind.

Jered looked at his girlfriend. "Are you serious? Mercury is..." trailing off, he pointed at the empty seat, momentarily lost for words.

"Afraid so," the scar-faced blonde confirmed succinctly.

The wavy-haired man put his heads into his palms and rested his elbows on the table. "That could become troublesome," he groaned.

"Well, at least it should be entertaining," Cathy smiled, and loaded her plate with another slice of chicken.

Unusual cries of joy echoed through the training hall, coming from the central arena. "I did it! I finally did it!" Within the sandy pit, a gleaming, menacing-looking figure that resembled a metal-encased skeleton stood over her fallen opponent, happily clapping her hands together. The clang of metal reverberated off the walls as the steel gauntlets made contact with each other. Then, the hands went up to the skull-like helmet and removed it, revealing Ami's happily smiling face, and she shook her head to let her blue bangs fall freely. For good measure, she gave the faux-head of the decapitated Reaper puppet a good kick before she went to retrieve her daggers from the leather-covered monstrosity's bulging back.

"Nice one!" Cathy congratulated, sitting on the wall surrounding the fighting pit, with the control helmet for the fake Reaper on her lap. "You caught me unaware with that teleport." She slid off the wall and landed on her feet, making a dull thud in the sand. Grinning, she stepped toward the blue-haired girl, whose smile revealed white teeth as she turned toward the blonde. The swordswoman's own grin widened "You somehow forgot to mention that you could already do that, though," she added, getting a little shrug in response that made Ami's pauldrons clatter. The teenager was still riding her adrenaline high and not feeling particularly guilty for springing a surprise on the older woman for once. Gratefully, she accepted the bottle of water that the blonde had brought.

"You must have studied very hard with Jadeite," the latter guessed, and watched Mercury nod silently while her cheeks coloured somewhat, and not from exertion. "He really does have a rather charming smile, no?" Ami nodded again, but froze half-way through the motion. Coughing, she spat out water, and with a shocked expression, she turned to fully look at Cathy, whose grin had transformed into that of a shark.

"You know?" Ami asked in a tiny voice once she had gained control of her coughing fit.

"It's really quite obvious if one knows what to look for," the blonde stated calmly, "which a certain general obviously does not."

"You won't tell him, right?" the senshi sputtered, nearing a panic.

"Of course not. However," Cathy looked Mercury straight in the eyes, "who knows how things will develop in the future? I don't really know your background or what they teach to girls in your world, so I have to ask, for your own safety: do you know where babies come from?"

Poor Mercury, who had just raised the bottle back to her lips, splashed herself in the face and promptly had another coughing fit. With a face as red as a tomato, she stuttered "Y-yes, but I can't believe you- I wouldn't-" Suddenly, her eyes narrowed. "Wait, this is revenge for me surprising you, isn't it?"

"Guilty," Cathy admitted, then ducked with a laugh as Ami tried to splash her from the bottle. The blonde broke into a run, and the blue-haired girl playfully gave chase. After a few minutes, she stopped, wincing.

"Is something wrong?" the blonde asked, no longer hearing the clanking sounds made by the footsteps of her armoured pursuer.

Ami was standing in place, stretching her arms and legs, testing how well the limbs moved. "Well, I didn't notice in the heat of the battle, but the armour's rapid movements really put a lot of stress on my body, " she commented. "It's nothing critical, but the bruises could add up over time. Snyder will be able to heal this up easily, though."

"I see. How well is the suit working out for you?"

"I still need more training. It can move so fast that my reflexes aren't completely up to the task. I'm improving at getting all of its speed out of it, beyond the limits of what I can normally do, but it's a bit like learning to walk again," Ami explained while peeling off the outer layers of the plate mail. Underneath, she was wearing the leotard of her senshi uniform, devoid of its skirt and ribbons, as they would just get in the way.

Cathy nodded. "I will adjust the training plan accordingly. We'll get your coordination in the armour up first before continuing with the combat training."

Two days later, Ami's closest advisers had joined her in the living room. Jered and Cathy shared a couch, while Jadeite and Snyder each had opted for one of the armchairs on opposite sides of the room. All four were looking with interest at Mercury, who had called them together for an unscheduled meeting. The blue-haired girl was sitting at the table, covering one hand with the other. She left them together when she stood up and looked at the curious faces, shrinking in on herself a bit at being the centre of attention.

"I have made an important breakthrough, and I called all of you here because I value your opinion," she announced.

Without further ado, she produced two shoebox-sized objects and put them next to each other on the desk. One was a miniature model of the dungeon heart her employees were familiar with. A circular wall surrounded a well-like pit, in which an organic red membrane would have been beating if this had been a real dungeon heart. Three evenly-spaced pillars supported its arching superstructure. The right model showed something like a crystal ball resting on a central dais, surrounded by four pillars, one on each corner.

"This," she pointed at the glittering, unfamiliar construct, "is what dungeon hearts on the Avatar Islands look like. As you can immediately see, there are two obvious differences, aside from the looks."

Obligingly, the others leaned forward, showing interest.

"First, the old-style dungeon heart lacks an area that can receive and convert gold, and requires an external supplement. Second, and more importantly, it is not alive, and I am therefore fairly sure that I know how to create one."

"That's great," Jered cheered immediately, "no more need to beg some dark gods for favour."

"Congratulations," Snyder said, but the red-headed acolyte didn't look too happy at the prospect of more dungeon hearts being created.

"There is more to this, I assume?" Jadeite wondered, peering at the two objects on the table with a raised eyebrow.

"Yes," Ami nodded, "those are only the most obvious external differences. There are many functional ones. The new-style dungeon hearts I have been working with are far more sophisticated and user-friendly than the older ones, meaning that I won't be able to port over my existing room designs. Or so my simulations lead me to believe, I haven't been able to test any of this in practice yet," she acknowledged. "Most of the differences stem from the fact that one is alive and the other is not. Most problematically, the old style hearts have no ability to work with mana. None. That ability is apparently a function that's inextricably linked to life, or in some cases unlife," Ami said, "meaning that I cannot patch it in later."

"What are the exact drawbacks of that?" Cathy wanted to know.

"Well, it means that the artefact requires gold or similarly valuable objects, like gems or precious metals, for everything, including maintenance and powering magic. While our treasury is currently full, the need for riches will probably be unsustainable in the long run. The Avatar Isles were completely strip-mined by the different Keepers there, and with no resources, their power has been broken."

"Oh? Why did no new-style Keepers take over?" Jered asked.

"I haven't been able to determine that yet," Ami admitted. "I assume that one or two Keepers are still holed up somewhere and are hoarding their resources to fend off invasions. Besides, there's nothing on those lands that would be worth the effort."

The weasel-featured man nodded and sank back in his seat.

"However, there could be a different reason. Despite their more primitive nature, old-style dungeon hearts are more magically powerful than new-style ones, provided that they have enough fuel. My research suggests that this is a consequence of them being more 'worldly', in a way." Seeing nothing but blank faces, she explained "A summoned imp dissipates back into mana when killed. If it was summoned with an old heart, the corpse would remain, as it was made from transmuted real material."

"Intriguing, but is this useful in practice?" Snyder wanted to know.

"In some cases, yes. You could survive on conjured food, for example," Mercury answered. "There is another drawback to the gold-only system, though," she continued. "One of my big advantages is my rapid mana regeneration rate. It will be much less useful in this situation, as the heart can't use it. In fact, without the reservoir inside the heart, I might no longer be able to power the Shabon Spray Freezing. With any luck, I could use the tiara created by my transformation to fuel the heart, though."

"All of these drawbacks sound rather crippling," Jadeite commented. "Do old-style hearts have any redeeming features?"

"I was getting to that," the blue-haired girl resumed her lecture. "Most of them are related to the dark gods. Them not being involved, that is. First, I don't need their favour, and can create new hearts when I have the resources. Second, I have determined how to block their power out completely." Somewhat chagrined, she continued "However, doing so will also prevent me from summoning imps to do my bidding, as the evil spirits that animate them also come from the dark gods."

Jered interrupted once again "That sounds really impractical; how will you dig out more rooms and claim territory without them?"

"I can replicate their picks, and any creature can do the claiming if it knows the right procedures, so that is not an insurmountable problem. I am more worried about losing access to ice golems, as they are derived from the imp-creation spell. Maybe an offshoot of the anti-reaper armour project could be adapted to replace them, " Ami continued on a more hopeful note. "Then, there is the corruption issue. I think I know how the surface dwellers got around it, but unfortunately, that option was lost to me the moment I bonded with the first dungeon heart."

"Why is that?" Snyder demanded to know, being most interested in the metaphysical aspects of the issue.

Ami wrung her hands anxiously "That would be because my soul is somewhere in the realm of darkness, as the Light gods told me," Ami explained, "so the dungeon heart is drawing power from there. The heroes had their soul in this world, so it drew power from here. There's not much I can do about this until I get my soul back."

"Oh." For once, the redhead was at a loss for words.

Breaking the gloomy mood, Ami continued "I have been thinking a lot about the corruption problem since I saw what the Avatar Islands have turned into. Keepers have some control over how it manifests. Malleus' desert is completely different from the hellish landscape of the Islands, for example. I think I know enough about the heart design to modify it and give me more control. Or at least direct it away from anything important." She stopped talking and looked around. "I was hoping to hear what you think I should do."

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Invading the Avatar Islands (DARK)

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Jered opened the leather-bound book on the table to a bookmark, tracing the rows and columns on the page with his index finger. Two female faces peered curiously over his shoulder, one blue-haired, the other blonde. "Well, budget-wise, you could squeeze in your two planned dungeon hearts while remaining able to pay all wages for two-and a half months. After that, you will be broke," The weasel-featured man determined. Deep in thought, he rubbed the stubble on his cheeks with an ink-stained hand. "Man, those things are expensive."

Ami leaned closer, peering at the numbers with a displeased frown. "It might be for the best to give this dungeon up completely, dismiss most of the minions, and keep only the research staff around," she thought out loud.

"That seems unwise. This place is still protected by most of Malleus' traps and fake dungeon hearts, making it very safe. Besides, you don't know how to replicate most of the rooms with the crystal heart design yet," Cathy objected.

"I know," the blue-haired girl stepped back from Jered and walked halfway around the table, where she sat down in front of her computer. "The problem is that this dungeon is also a huge liability. It's powered with an organic heart, and the dark gods could send another plague whenever they feel like it. Everyone in it is a potential hostage."

"Yes, it's not an easy decision," the swordswoman conceded, shuddering and wrapping her arms around herself as she remembered lying in bed with a high fever, unable to move and feeling sore all over.

"Actually, it should be," Snyder commented, participating in the conversation for the first time. The white-and-red dressed acolyte sat on the couch, his chin resting on his folded hands. "The question

is not whether the dark gods will use their power against Mercury again, but when. First, Azzathra has already made it clear that he is trying to get her killed with the way he stacked the deck against her. If she doesn't participate in the duel-"

"Which is the only sane choice, despite our preparations," Jered interrupted. He looked at Ami, who nodded once.

"Exactly. As I was saying, the moment Mercury makes it clear she has no intention of going through with that suicidal battle, the plague will be back. So the longest she will be able to hold onto this dungeon is until the deadline passes. Less than two months," the acolyte continued.

"Unless I won the duel," Ami proposed an alternative, the corners of her mouth turning downwards at the thought. "But even then, I couldn't trust Azzathra to keep his word. He has made it clear that he only helped me because he wanted to see me die in an amusing way instead of the plague killing me," she stated tensely.

"Is there a way to replace the current dungeon heart with a crystal one?" Cathy fished for options.

The teenage Keeper typing away at her keyboard shook her head. "No. The infrastructure and traps all run on mana. The systems are incompatible." Her gaze unfocused as she searched for a good analogy and looked upward, letting her head rest on the back of her chair. "It's... kind of like ripping the heart out of a human and attempting to replace it with a spring taken from a large mechanical clock. It's just not going to work."

Silence reigned as the others contemplated this gruesome imagery. Jered broke it first, harrumphing as he drew a conclusion. "We will have to move. This location is too well-known for us to remain here without the protection of the traps." He swivelled in his chair to face Mercury as he continued "So, on to the logistics side. Where do we go and what do we take?"

Pristine snow and ice shone in the light of the low-hanging sun,

blanketing hills and plains with their whiteness. The shadowy flanks of the frozen hills shimmered blue, reflecting the colour of the sky.

A sudden gust of wind ripped snowflakes from the ground, making them dance as if trapped in a whirlwind. They surrounded a flash of blue that deposited two slender figures onto the frozen ground.

The shorter, black-clad female released her grip on the taller one, who squinted, blinded by the sunlight reflecting off of the pristine, unbroken snow cover. "It's cooooold! What is this, the North Pole?" Cathy danced from one foot to the other to warm up and tightened the cord keeping her fur-lined mantle shut, breath condensing into a cloud in front of her lips. She turned toward the blue ocean, where the brightness was more bearable.

"Close." Ami let her gaze wander over the surrounding whiteness up to the point where it suddenly turned into a cliff face against which the waves broke. "We are in the northern Arctic regions, on an iceberg, to be precise."

"This thing is made of ice? It's huge," the long-haired blond tapped her boots against the snow-covered ground experimentally, grimacing as if she was expecting it to crack and swallow her any moment now. "Are you sure this is safe?"

"Don't worry, the ice is hundreds of metres thick," the blue-haired girl reassured her. With her index finger outstretched, she pointed at the line where ice and water met, and traced its contours as she slowly turned around. "See how big it is? And the visible part over water is only one seventh of the whole mass!"

"Oh, good." Cathy calmed down, but stayed alert. "Err, it's not going to suddenly turn over, is it?"

With a violet shimmer, a grey-uniformed man suddenly stood next to the duo. "Cease your whining. Why did you insist on coming along, anyway?" Jadeite asked while loading a large sack off of his shoulders. It jingled when he put it on the ground.

"Well, I wanted to get back into the fresh air and see the sun again," the shivering swordswoman huffed, "without all the desert dust and

the heat, that is. However, this, "she spread her arms and glared at the dim, glowing disk close above the horizon," goes way too far in the opposite direction! Besides, I'm not going to miss the chance to see what creating a dungeon heart looks like!"

"Whatever. I'll go get the rest," the dark general disappeared into thin air, leaving only a few shadowy lines that faded upward in his wake.

Cathy jostled the bag of gold with her toes, and turned to Mercury, who had her visor up and was focusing her attention on her palmtop. "What are you doing?" the blonde asked, seeing nothing out of ordinary on the iceberg. Above water, it was elongated and flat, except for a hump that protruded on one side like a hill.

"I'm calculating where its centre of mass is, and where I should put the engines," the young Keeper replied, not looking up from her work. Suddenly, she smiled. "Ah! There! Let's get started."

Ami raised her hand, and an imp sprang forth from a cloud of green motes that danced around her fingers. It somersaulted before landing in the snow and let out a delighted squeak before gazing at Ami with big, black eyes, waiting for an order.

"That way," the blue-haired girl commanded, and the little brownish-green humanoid ran into the indicated direction, leaving odd two-toed imprints in the snow. It didn't seem bothered by the cold despite wearing nothing but a loincloth and a backpack. In contrast, Cathy was rubbing her hands together for warmth as she plodded after the creature that was only half her size. It suddenly stopped, unslung its pick from its shoulders, and brought it down onto the snow with a soft thudding sound. Glittering shards went flying in all directions as the magical pick bit deeply into the ground, chipping away at the ice with surprising speed. When the blonde's head peaked out over the edge of the newly-dug opening, a steep ramp leading below the surface was already waiting, and the clanging of metal against ice reverberated from the depths.

"Cathy, wait!" Ami shouted, but the swordswoman had already set foot on the downward-leading slope, eager to get out of the chilly wind. Her head had barely disappeared from sight when the young

Keeper heard a startled yelp that rapidly degenerated into shouted curses. A quick teleport brought Ami into the tunnel, just in time to float over and grab a hold of the blonde's arm as she slid past, her fingers scrambling ineffectively for purchase on the slippery ice. "That's what I wanted to tell you," the blue-haired girl explained, "no stairs yet."

Dangling from the younger girl's arm, Cathy gathered her smashed dignity and stood up. "I hate this place." She descended the rest of the way steadying herself against the floating girl's shoulder, walking with tiny little steps. "Please tell me we are not going to live here!"

"Sorry, but we might have to, if things go poorly," Ami apologised. "At the moment, this is just supposed to be a storeroom for gold and books and a mobile mining outpost. I plan for us to move to the Avatar Isles once I have conquered enough of them. They seem sparsely populated, and it's a good place to recover room designs and experiment with the corruption effect."

"I hope that pans out," Cathy commented, moving more steadily now that the tunnel had become horizontal again. Gratefully, she took a torch that Ami produced for her with a muttered incantation. The darkness underneath the snow and ice cover retreated from the flame's flickering light to reveal freshly-hewn walls. "This is creepy," the blonde said after taking a few steps in silence. She was referring to the multiple reflections of both girls that moved alongside them and shrank, grew and twisted as the uneven ice distorted them.

"It's not far now," Ami assured her companion. "The centre of the iceberg is just ahead, and my imp is already clearing a room. She waved her hand, and a second minion coalesced from a cloud of pure, glowing mana, looked at its surroundings in wide-eyed wonder, and then rushed out of the circle illuminated by the torchlight.

The two girls followed the new servant at their more sedate pace and caught up with it a minute later. They found it sitting right next to the first imp, standing in a large, square chamber that could have held a school bus. Cathy hesitated at the entrance, her eyes wandering up to the dome-shaped ceiling that resembled a giant bubble that had crystallised in the iceberg. "Whoa, the little critters

do work fast."

Ami nodded her assent and hovered into the chamber. With little more than a thought, the gold that Jadeite was bringing from her home dungeon and leaving in the snow above appeared before her. "I wonder how other Keepers manage to get the gold in place," she wondered out loud, noting that her soft voice produced an echo in the vast emptiness of the chamber.

Cathy shrugged and kept out of the way, watching with eyes that got rounder and rounder the more gold piled up in the centre of the chamber. When the heap of coins was taller than she was, she gaped with her mouth open, the cold forgotten. "I hadn't realised those things were *that* expensive!"

"I still have a hard time believing that this all belongs to me," Ami said. "It's more than I expected to ever see in my life." She walked around the pile, watching as yet another bag appeared on top of it and coins rolled down the flanks. "That's the last one. It's time to get started." The blue-haired girl had memorised the instructions, of course, but she reread them another time on her palmtop just to be sure. Any mistake now was one she literally couldn't afford. "Cathy, wait in the entrance. I'm going to begin this."

My heart is beating as if I was going into a difficult exam, the blue-haired girl thought as she stood at the base of the heap of gold and raised her arms straight up. She inhaled deeply, gathering air for the first sentence of the magical chant, and channelled magic into her voice. Once the first syllables had left her mouth, the pile of gold slowly liquefied and spread out until it encountered an invisible, circular barrier. The cylinder of metal, molten despite a lack of heat, started seeping into the ground. Power tingled on Ami's skin while she continued directing the magic, watching the weakly-glowing tendrils of gold force their way down into the floor. Through the transparent ice, she could track their progress and see them branch again and again like the roots of a plant, but in a far more regular pattern. She tried to keep her breathing even as she intoned the next sentence. At this point, she was deviating from Malleus' knowledge and relying only on her own research, but there was no time to hesitate now. Feeling a drop of sweat run down her brow, Ami pressed on. Her next words sent light tremors through the

ground, and in the corner, Cathy blinked in alarm when the vibrations of the room caused the ice to hum.

Movement drew the senshi's attention back to the centre of the room. Like mushrooms, four pillars of ice grew noiselessly upwards, each one encasing a helix of gold in their centre. They did not stop until they met the ceiling, the contact with which prompted a reaction. Suddenly, their substance was neither gold nor ice, but something that resembled marble and was far stronger. To Ami, the columns looked vaguely Greek in appearance, but instead of ionic capitals, they were topped by an arrangement of Mercury signs. A moment later, blinding arcs of lightning shot from each column, intersecting at the central point in the space between the pillars. Their brilliance illuminated the cavern brighter than day, and Ami was suddenly glad that she had memorised the text of the spell completely while she shielded her eyes from the glare. She wouldn't have been able to read them in this light that turned the world into an arrangement of stark black and whites. Concentrating so that she would not trip over the unfamiliar pronunciations, she diligently continued her work. With a tortured wail, reality ripped open where the four bolts of electricity met. A blast of thunder washed over Ami, blowing her hair out of her face and forcing her to shut her eyes. When she opened them again, the light was gone, and a sphere of blackness hung in the air, framed by the stone pillars. As if attracted by the eerie black ball, a dais rose from the ground with a groan.

The chanting girl felt drained, as if she had run at full speed for an hour when she commenced the last sentence of her spell. The wailing sphere shrunk and inverted itself, extruding a shell that had a white nacre sheen, and which grew larger and larger. What little of the gold had not been absorbed yet flowed upward, onto the dais, and reached for the orb. The entire structure glowed brightly for a final time, after which all the gold was gone and the ice forming the new dungeon heart had turned into the same marble-looking substance that the pillars were made of. Ami belatedly noticed that the dais had grown a staircase from each of its sides before she found herself feeling strangely weightless. An inexorable force lifted her off of her feet and dragged her toward the large crystal sphere.

Cathy let out a cry of alarm when Mercury suddenly flew toward the

freshly-created orb that formed the centrepiece of the new dungeon heart. Instead of breaking her neck from the high speed impact, the girl simply disappeared within the dull sphere. An instant later, it flared up with bright white light, and the blonde heard a deep rumble reverberate through the very essence of the iceberg - the artefact's first heartbeat. She broke into a run, taking the five steps leading up to the dais in a single go, and stopped in front of the large, pulsating sphere that rested on the golden backs of three bent-over, life-sized troll statues. She reached for the smooth, glowing surface of the orb and hesitated. "Mercury? Are you in there?"

"DON'T TOUCH THAT! Mercury's voice screeched in the blonde's head, loud enough to stun her for a moment. She jerked her hand back as if burnt. *"Wait, give me a moment,"* the mental voice continued.

Cathy thought she saw a flicker of shadow underneath the glass-like surface, moving sideways. Following it with her eyes, she was only mildly surprised when the blue-haired head of the Keeper appeared and moved through the shell as if it wasn't there. Ami stepped out of the artefact and floated to the ground, smiling widely at Cathy and cocking her head. "I didn't expect that last part, but I feel that everything went all right!" Behind her, several gold-coloured bands slid into place around the orb, one after the other. In the end, a huge sapphire appeared on top of the sphere where all the golden bands met. It rotated around its own axis once with the sound of a key being turned in a lock. "Good, it's safe to touch now," Ami said. "Go ahead if you like."

"It's beautiful," Cathy breathed, her face illuminated by the light coming from the orb. "It's hard to believe that something like that is an evil artefact." Her fingers made contact with the smooth surface. "It's warm," she stated in surprise. "So what would have happened if I had touched it earlier?"

Ami looked at the floor. "I'm not sure. Best case scenario, it would have been destroyed. Worst case, you would have become a Keeper, like me," she pointed out. "I'm sorry, I didn't want to put you into danger."

"Whew, looks like I dodged an arrow there," the swordswoman

agreed cheerfully. "Don't worry about it, nothing bad happened. Also, I think the little guys agree with your assessment that everything went well."

Ami's gaze followed Cathy's outstretched arm to where both imps had started tiling the floor and fortifying the ice of the walls. "Yes! I did it!" she shouted in an uncharacteristic burst of excitement, thrusting her right fist in the air. "I won't have to fight the Reaper! I'm so relieved!" She laughed happily, ran up to Cathy and grabbed her hands. "I won't have to fight him! Yes!" The bemused blonde found herself dragged along as the blue-haired girl bounced up and down in a way that would have done Usagi proud. The swordwoman smiled and ruffled the teenager's hair. "Well done!"

Ami looked over the desolate landscape, where plains of ash and smoking lakes of fire stretched as far as the eye could see. A sudden gust of wind prompted her to seek shelter deeper underneath the jagged black rock overhang that protected her from the rain. Acidic yellow droplets fell from the red-coloured sky, hissing and bubbling on the ground, and poisoning any life that might have dared eke out an existence on this cursed continent. As usual, the clouds looked like trails of fire and spiralled slowly around a point that was out of Ami's sight range, but that her scrying attempts had revealed to be the highest mountain of this realm. The eye of the storm sat right above the blackened citadel that had once been known as Skybird Trill, the fortress of the late Avatar. The ruin was so haunted that it seemed to glow from all the ghosts flitting in and out of the windows and circling the scorched towers. To the blue-haired girl, the sacked city seemed the obvious location for the main base of the most powerful Keeper of the islands. Not only was the corruption of the land centred on it, it also dominated the landscape and was a symbol for the triumph of darkness over light. The senshi's eyebrows formed a v-shape as she frowned. She fully intended to rectify this before the deadline for the duel. The enemy Keeper or Keepers had to be miserly with their limited gold, while she could simply make more golems as long as she still had organic dungeon hearts. The wind intensity increased, and more of the caustic raindrops splashed onto the ground close to Ami's boots.

She had seen enough, and disappeared within a storm of snowflakes.

With a flash of blue light that cast the brickwork of the vaulting tunnel into stark relief, Ami reappeared in the only area of the Avatar Islands that she was sure did not belong to enemies: her own. The stone corridors and walls had the fresh look of recently-erected masonry. No moss or lichen marred their bricks, and no rust stained the iron mountings holding the blazing torches that illuminated the place. They would continue to do so for as long as the vaults were connected to the dungeon heart on her ice ship. The vessel still rested safely off-shore beneath the waves, impervious to attack by the hero warship - or at least that was what Ami hoped. Imps scurried out of her way as she walked through the halls of the complex that bore little resemblance to the simple tunnel it had started out as. With the aid of a veritable army of imps, she had transformed it into a labyrinth of meandering hallways and dead ends, with only a single path leading to the deepest chamber. Ami stopped at one of the rooms, empty like all of the others. Only because she knew what to look for did she notice that the seams surrounding one of the floor tiles were deeper than those of its neighbours. Stepping on it would trigger one of the many, many mechanical traps that defended this place. This particular one would result in a boulder weighing about a ton dropping on the intruder.

With a somewhat displeased frown, the girl stepped back. Mechanical traps were the whole purpose of this place, but their brutality was not something she relished. At least, they did not need power and would still be functional when she switched this place from the organic heart to a crystal one. An imp peered at her out of one of the hidden slits in the wall as she went by. Recognising her, it did not pull the lever that would trigger the floor folding away to send passers-by into the deep pit below. She passed more of the well-concealed obstacles on her way to the source of the clanging noise that resounded through the dungeon. Ahead, blades flashed and screeched against each other as figures in full plate mail, female in build, duelled each other with massive two-handed swords. Ami smiled at the sight, as it once again reminded her that she would not have to battle the Reaper. All the combat training she had done could still benefit her golems, at least for as long as she was still

able to use them. Her eyes flashed a little redder when she thought back to the horned monster currently chained up in her main base. She couldn't just get rid of him, that would give away the game to Azzathra before the time was right. No, she would have to stand his presence for a while longer.

Upon seeing the Keeper, the animated statues ceased their training and lined up in a box formation seven man wide and five deep. Directed by the single golem standing proudly in front of them, they all raised their visors and saluted. Ami stared into the transparent ice faces that mimicked her own down to the last detail, surprised at the action *They really like getting into their roles,* she thought. Her eyes took in the metal-clad forms, all using troll-forged equipment that had been put together with great haste. These were about all the golems she could support if she empowered one of them with her senshi powers to serve as leader and as her host. While her fighters' equipment was a bit on the shoddy side, it wasn't as if a stab through one of the gaps would be able to seriously injure their frozen bodies.

"Carry on," she ordered as she continued on her way. Arming the golems was an unfortunate necessity because ice alone just wouldn't be enough to harm the inorganic matter of the crystal-type dungeon hearts. Neither would just freezing them with her Shabon Spray Freezing. Jadeite pouring lava on them through a portal *might* work, but considering that she had read multiple accounts of one of them growing out of a pool of magma, she had her doubts. Ami stopped before the large multi-ton block that completely obstructed the entrance leading into the deepest chamber, both to collect her thoughts and to see whether the opening mechanism was working properly. With loud creaking and rattling noises, a team of imps turned the massive, many-handled winch located inside the locked chamber that slowly lifted the obstacle out of her path. She allowed herself another smile when the lower edge of the stone cleared her line of sight, revealing the glittering pile within the room. Any invader without heavy equipment would be stumped by *that* door for a while.

"Everything is in place as you ordered," Jadeite greeted her from within, bowing politely. The grey-uniformed general was hovering in the air above the gold, looking down on it with a hint of disapproval.

"Are you sure this," he gestured toward the riches on the ground, "isn't a bit premature?"

Ami was grateful for the question. Maybe convincing him would help her convince herself that creating the second crystal heart here was the right decision. Besides, the discussion would distract her from how handsome he looked. "The situation is such that there is nothing to be gained from waiting. The land is just too big to find out all about the enemy force composition by scrying, and I won't be able to make more golems or create more rooms and obstacles than I already have."

The curly-haired blond nodded, accepting that reasoning. "Still, there are other options, like continuing to run this place with the ship's heart, or to strike at the surrounding dungeon hearts first before making your own."

"I don't want to risk the ship's heart. If I sail it into remote waters, far away from any living thing, I should be able to keep it, whether the dark gods hate me or not. There will be nobody for them to vent their anger on, and I will be able to continue drawing on its mana. The thing is just irreplaceable. In contrast, all I risk losing with the crystal heart is time and gold."

"You are assuming that the dark gods can't just taint the mana," Jadeite pointed out, crossing his arms. "But why have the dungeon heart here at all if you can't properly make use of it yet?"

"Bait," Ami explained. Seeing the dark general's single raised eyebrow, she elaborated "Well, that, and I want to have an unassailable position before the enemies become aware of me. By all accounts of what happened during the famine fifteen years back, they shouldn't be able to afford to lose troops to traps, and a dungeon with no heart is not going to tempt them inside. Unfortunately, all of Avatar Island is currently claimed by some Keeper or other, so enemy minions can be transported in from all over the continent in an instant. If I tried to set up shop only after destroying a dungeon heart, the enemy would be warned and alert, and I would be swarmed before I could set enough traps."

"I remain unconvinced," Jadeite objected, touching down on the

ground next to Ami and looking at her with a measuring glance.

The girl lowered her head. "I also need claimed terrain to send prisoners to, and to experiment with the heart's corruption effects," she added. "I'm not really sure how that works for crystal hearts, as supposedly dark mana is the source of the corruption. Hmm, maybe the mana just serves as some kind of distributing agent? But I digress. This plan is also the one with the highest calculated probability of success. Attacking first without a local base already established results in only half the chance of successfully seizing lore and room designs from the local Keepers," she lectured in her 'explain the exercise to Usagi' voice.

"Hmmph. Numbers are not everything. I have a bad feeling about this," the dark general voiced his opinion and walked away, blending into one of the shadowy corners, "but it's your decision in the end, and I will help you to make it work out as well as possible."

Blushing faintly, Ami nodded and turned her attention toward the small mountain of gold waiting for her as she approached it with firm, determined steps.

Clad in black and gold, Ami slid out of the crystal orb of the newly created dungeon heart, whose frame locked into place the moment its Keeper had fully emerged from it. With a smile, she turned to Jadeite, who frowned at her. An instant later, she flinched and felt an ache directly behind the bridge of her nose, painful enough to make her grit her teeth. "Ungh," she groaned, "what is going on?"

"Is it supposed to do that?" the curly-haired general stared at the newly-born dungeon heart in alarm.

Fighting against the splitting headache that made her eyes tear up, Ami turned and saw emerald motes and lightning of the same colour dance around the pillars and dais. *What? It can't channel mana! That means-* her eyes widened in alarm when the crystal pulsed bright white, banishing the ephemeral lights creeping along its edges. Floor tiles sprang out of their places and settled again. The motion expanded outward from the crystal heart, like a ripple

through a pond. The ache in Ami's head redoubled. "The dungeon hearts! They are fighting for dominance! ARGH!" The blue-haired girl stumbled, dropping to one knee. In her mind, an image of the organic heart on the ice ship formed. A crack in its outer wall crept forward a finger's length with each pulse of the crystal artefact. Every time the damage worsened, Ami felt as if someone had stabbed her in the chest with a knife. Pressing her hands between her breasts, she disappeared from Jadeite's sight - a normal Keeper transport, not the teleportation he had taught her.

Ami landed on top of the organic dungeon heart and leaned heavily on the wall surrounding its central pit. She nearly fell into it and onto the sick-looking, fast-beating membrane when another wave of sympathetic pain went through her. *I have to shut it down before it dies!* Hurriedly, she started extracting the part of the heart that was *her* from the rumbling artefact. The floor dropped out beneath her as the dungeon heart retracted into the ground, and she landed hard on the already formed protective stone cover. Breathing laboriously, she pulled herself to her knees in relief. The phantom pain was gone as if it had never been, but she was uncomfortably aware of how close the crack had managed to get to central pit. Now that the panicked beating of the heart had stopped, she noticed the faint clinking noises coming from all around. Dazedly, she thought she heard water gurgle somewhere in the submarine.

Jadeite shimmered into existence, and looked around at the network of fissures creeping through the ice forming the walls. "Your new creation seems rather spirited," he commented. His steely-blue eyes focused on something on the ground. "Vengeful too. We have to get out of here!"

Before the curly-haired general's words could really sink in, he had already grabbed Ami's left upper arm and dragged her to her feet. From the corner of her eyes, she saw an entire cascade of cracks approach the stone disc covering the inert dungeon heart, before Jadeite dragged her into a teleport. The two appeared on a hill overlooking the coast, where yellowish waves broke against the jagged cliffs on the shore. Thankfully, it had stopped raining.

"I- I didn't expect that," Ami stammered, still pale from the experience. "There was absolutely nothing in any of the texts or

simulations that would have prepared me for this. I mean, who would think that artefacts could be territorial? They both belong to me! I hope we can recover-"

Out in the ocean, not far from the shore, a sizzling column of water rose into the sky. Up and up it climbed until it had reached the height of a small skyscraper, glowing with a verdant brilliance that illuminated the region like a lighthouse. A few seconds later, it collapsed back into the frothing sea.

"What the hell?" Jadeite exclaimed, his grip on Mercury's arm tightening.

With a voice that lacked any inflection, the shell-shocked girl replied "Ruptured mana reservoir explosively discharging." She stood silently and stared at the ocean with wide eyes, unwilling to believe that her most valuable asset had just blown up. When the realisation finally hit fully home, she stomped her foot in frustration and cursed "Darn it!" Next to her, Jadeite tensed. This was the point where Beryl would be assigning blame. Mercury remained silent and swallowed several times before addressing the dark general with a faint smile. "T-Thank you for getting me out of there," she inclined her head. "You can let go of my arm now," she added as her cheeks reddened, but Jadeite was not looking at her.

"We got company, look," he pointed at a nearby hillside just beyond the girl's claimed territory.

Ami's head whipped in the indicated direction. At first, she thought she was looking at an approaching fog bank, but then she realised that the light of the smouldering sky did not stain the phenomenon's whiteness orange, like it did everything else. "Ghosts," she muttered after observing the luminescent avalanche for a few seconds. Gaunt, nearly skeletal faces warped into masks of hate and agony blazed over the landscape like pale comets, extending grasping hands forward from the ethereal banners that were their bodies. "They must have seen the glare of the explosion," she drew the obvious conclusion. The cries of the vengeful spectres drifted over on the wind. Ami could not only hear the awful howls, but also feel them as an awful vibration in her bones that raised the hair on the back of her neck and made her want to hide under her bed. *Some*

days, it just doesn't pay to get up in the morning.

A small star made of darkness, looking too tiny to be of any use against the inrushing tide of spectral creatures, crossed the distance and met one of the foremost undead head on, only to be sucked into the semi-transparent body and changing direction as it passed through.

"Magic is useless against them," Ami cried out, "use your telekinesis! Their bodies are easily disrupted by physical impacts!"

Jadeite gave the blue-haired girl, who touched her ear and summoned her visor, an odd look. Hitting a ghost to kill it seemed strange to him, but she was the one with the tactical computer. Shrugging, he raised his right hand, palm facing upward. A sheet of blackened rubble followed the motion, rising off the ground in a dust cloud, and then shot toward the incoming wave of enemies like pellets fired from a shotgun. The spectres swerved aside and streaked into the sky to get out of the path of the projectiles. *Huh, so she was right.*

"Look out, it's only a distraction!" Ami shouted in alert when her visor indicated threats outside of the visible spectrum arriving from behind. She kicked backward, feeling her foot impact something that gave way after resisting the first push. Fingers cold like the grave brushed across her extended leg, leaving it numb where they touched her. Over her shoulder, she caught a glimpse of stringy, rotting hair surrounding a disintegrating face. The visage with a foot print in it dissolved. With her leg not yet retracted, she transported herself and Jadeite to the crystal heart chamber and out of the ambush.

"What?" the blond general asked in confusion at the sudden change of scenery.

Ami put her numbed leg back on the ground and waved her arms to not lose her balance, and immediately felt silly once she remembered that she could fly. "There was another wave of ghosts sneaking up on us, cloaked," she explained while massaging her shin where the spectre had touched it. Slowly, the feeling was returning, causing her skin to itch. "We'll have a better chance

stopping them when they enter the dungeon. You stay here and defend the heart," the young Keeper ordered. She was already positioning her golem guardians at choice choke points along the route that the invaders would have to take. "Shabon Spray!"

A bank of magical fog that did nothing to impede her vision suddenly filled the inner sanctum, then disappeared as she moved it over to the entrance. *"Cathy! Emergency! Get the scrying crew to the command centre and keep me informed about enemy movements!"* the blue-haired girl commanded telepathically, her system full of adrenaline. She hadn't expected her defences to be tested this early. "Imps, to your battle stations!" With an excited nod to Jadeite, she turned into a black shadow that shot into the lead golem, who had just dropped out of thin air and landed with a clatter. The grille of its visor lit up with red light when the Keeper assumed control of the frozen body within.

Fog billowed out of the rectangular entrance to Ami's dungeon, making the invisible ghosts stand out as clear impressions in the greyish mist. This was enough for the two guards waiting behind the narrow gap to cleave the spectral beings asunder. Metal rattled against barbed chains wrapped around the arms of a transparent woman whose face looked as if she had been flayed alive. The ghost let out a horrible screech when the merciless blade stabbed her in the forehead and sent her to the release of true death. More of the wrathful spirits appeared around the entrance, but kept out of reach of the two armoured figures, circling the opening like hungry wolves.

"Enemy Keeper approaching the front gate," one of the warlocks alerted Mercury, his voice distorted by the distance. The senshi focused her vision there, just in time to see a shockwave part her fog, barrel down on her guards like a freight train and pick them up. They tumbled like leaves in the wind until they slammed into a wall and clattered down as a disorderly pile of armour. From the water seeping out of the joints, Ami could already see that the golems within had been shattered, and she created two more to take their place. In front of the entrance stood a tall, deathly pale and bald figure, clad in a simple black robe that flowed around him like liquid shadow. He lowered his outstretched arm and grinned, revealing

two massively elongated canines in his upper jaw. An inverted pentagram shone forth on his forehead, between two eyes that glowed like burning embers from Keeper possession.

"Well, if he wants to get into a magic duel..." Ami's grin, hidden underneath her helmet, resembled that of a predator. Without warning, the enemy was suddenly encased within a block of ice - and just as suddenly gone, leaving nothing but a human-shaped impression in the ice. The wave of ghosts flooding in through the doors like a milky stream did not care, and advanced past the first bend, moving directly into the line of fire of half a dozen golems waiting behind arrow slits. With loud pops, icicle-like fingers detached and scythed down the front ranks of the ghosts. The torrent of tormented spirits hesitated, which was enough for Ami to pick up a boulder with her Keeper powers and roll it down the incline leading down to the entrance. She frowned when most of the evil spectres just flattened themselves against the walls or levitated up to the ceiling and avoided it. Her next surprise came when a swarm of bats flew down the corridor, right through the ghosts and into the firing range crewed by her golems. Against such small, madly fluttering targets, the finger barrage failed to hit even once, and the flying creatures poured in through the arrow slits.

"Crap! Vampire!" one of the warlocks shouted with alarm. In the small space between the golems, the swarm of bats coalesced into a pale, black-haired and unarmed female. With a blurred punch, she dented one golem's breast plate and sent the armoured figure flying into its companions, then rebounded its falling two-hander off of her heel, caught it by the grip, and impaled the entire wiggling pile on the long weapon, cackling all the while. An instant later, one of Ami's lightning bolts fried her head, and she exploded into a swirl of blackness. "Got that one!"

"There's more of them! The traps aren't slowing them down much!"

Ami bit back a curse. While she had been aiming, the ghosts had poured deeper into the corridors paving the way for their vampire masters. Two black shapes were dashing down the hall, legs blurring as they pumped. The floor dropped out under the first, but he just jumped to the right wall and continued sprinting along that. The second vampire turned into bats that mingled with the still

incoming ghosts. At the speeds they were going, the effectiveness of blades popping out at chest height was perfectly satisfying and took care of that problem. "Collapse tunnels three to seven, they are coming in too quickly," Ami ordered. Nothing happened, with the next transmission informing her of the reason.

Watch out! The ghosts have squeezed into the imps' observation posts!

Incoming Keeper! Incoming Keeper!

Feeling harried, Mercury manually slapped away the supports that prevented the closest access tunnels from collapsing. With a rumble, the ceiling crumbled, stirring up a cloud of dust. That should slow them down. She turned her attention to her main enemy, who was floating down the corridor, surrounded by an unholy halo of spectres. Ami threw another lightning bolt at him, but the ablative layer of howling, distorted faces chained to the vampire absorbed the magic. She heard the enemy snicker at her and wave his clawed hands in a mock greeting. The eight armoured golems suddenly popping up all around him and hacking away with their greatswords provoked a different reaction. "BEGONE!" the monster hissed and snapped his fingers. A red-glowing ring of concussive force erupted from his body, catapulting his attackers away and slamming them into the walls. From the cracking noises alone, Ami knew they wouldn't get up again.

"Mercury, there are at least five vampires active in the dungeon!"

The senshi ignored the warning. The blast wave had divested the enemy Keeper of his protective shell, and she took the opportunity to take another shot at him. Impossibly, the possessed vampire spun out of the way at the last moment, turning the certain kill into a graze that incinerated his arm. To Ami's consternation, it regrew from shadows even as his ghostly protection flowed back over him. The enemy Keeper gave a mock bow. "Aww, missed me. Would you like to try again?"

"Golems are holding the line against the ghosts, but some invisible ones are slipping past and triggering traps!"

"Vampires got lost in labyrinth, currently pose limited threat!"

Three of the lords of the undead were currently rushing down a long, straight corridor, weaving between falling boulders as they advanced. The opportunity was too good to pass up. Ami withdrew one of her stored up dark Shabon Spray Freezings from storage and sent the tunnel-filling blast of sharp-edged black ice whistling into the fiends' direction. Their pupils barely had the time to shrink to pinpricks in shock before the spell slammed into them. Ami was treated to the sickening sight of the walls and floor being painted red with blood and gore. It turned into black goo that evaporated only moments later, but the teenager was glad that her current golem body had no stomach that could turn.

"All access tunnels collapsed, Keeper is still approaching." one of the warlocks informed Ami, who took advantage of the lull in battle that these roadblocks provided, and spied on the enemy leader again. The smug bastard was still floating within his protective cloud of enslaved, screaming ghosts. Her anger grew when she saw that some of those agonised, twisted spirits were those of children, who could only have died in the Keeper's torture chambers. Oh yes, she was going to take another shot at him. He was walking past just the right trap. Its imp operator was long dead, but she had no trouble manipulating it from a distance. A wall panel slid aside with a soft click that was masked by the thunder of another lightning bolt slamming ineffectively into the possessed vampire's defences.

"I'd thought you had learned your lesson now, you sorry excuse for a - GACK!" the enemy taunted only to be rudely interrupted by a ballista bolt to the stomach. Pinned like an insect to the flagpole-sized arrow, he whooshed down the corridor until the iron head buried itself in the wall with a jolt that made the shaft vibrate. The vampire's teeth clattered as the vibrations shook his body, and he looked down at the weapon impaling him with a mildly surprised frown. Ami targeted another spell at the wood lodged within the monster, bypassing his defences. A blast of unbearable brightness consumed the animated corpse from within, changing into orange and later red as it turned into a firewall that raced down the tunnel.

"Enemy advance has halted, they seem unable to bypass the collapsed corridors," Ami's faithful minions reported. Finally. It was

about time she got this situation under control. She had been terrified for a while, thinking she was in over her head. *"We still have ghosts milling about in every room, and two vampires too- wait, the Keeper just possessed one of them! She's going for the golems!"*

The three ice constructs might as well not have defended themselves, for all the good their struggles availed them. The monster unleashed a flurry of barely visible punches and kicks at her opponents. The helmeted head of one of the statues came right off from a spinning kick and bounced off of the brick wall with a clang, and the vampire's claws tore straight through the breastplate of the second and ripped out the control cube as if it was a heart. For the third, she had other plans. She pounced, tackling the simulacrum to the floor, and knelt down on its chest. Both disappeared under a protective cocoon of ghostly slaves, and Ami saw the bloodsucker pull off the golem's helmet to take a look at its face. The vampire leaned in as if to kiss the ice creature, guiding its chin with her thumb and index finger. The icy servant's struggles ceased when it made eye contact with the enemy Keeper, who stared unblinkingly into the golems eyes for a few heartbeats. "I see," she declared, and let go of her victim. Its head dropped down limply, its mind gone. All of a sudden, what remained of the invasion force disappeared from Ami's dungeon, vanishing into thin air.

"We won? Just like that?" the teenage Keeper asked, perplexed at the sudden resolution. "What was that all about?"

"I don't know what you are talking about," Jadeite declared, feeling left out of the loop. All he knew was that the sounds of battle outside had suddenly stopped for no reason. "We won?"

"Hardly," a male voice intruded from behind them. Both the senshi-powered ice golem and Jadeite whirled around with similar expression of surprise and shock, dropping into combat stances.

"I-Impossible! I destroyed you!" Ami protested meekly at the sight of the vampire she had incinerated earlier, who was standing much too close for comfort to her dungeon heart. The pentagram on his bald head glowed in the same crimson colour as his possessed eyes. "How did you get in here?"

"This has to be the most half-assed invasion attempt that I ever had to waste my time crushing," the enemy Keeper replied, ignoring the question. "You didn't even have the courtesy to bring tasty snacks, only those lame bags of water. Not even gold. Pitiful." He seemed decidedly unimpressed by the sight of the golems that Ami was interposing as quickly as she could recall them between his borrowed body and the dungeon heart. "Oh well, I will just eat blondie over there once I have gotten rid of that eyesore," the pointy-eared vampire added, gesturing toward the artefact.

"Who are you, anyway?" Ami asked, trying to buy time so she could position her army better and find out what was going on. It didn't look as if his magical defences were still up, at least.

The vampire sighed. "Emperor Zarekos, the Keeper who has crushed all his competitors into dust and is now the undisputed ruler of the Avatar Isles. Definitely not pleased to meet you."

"Likewise," Jadeite replied in a deadpan tone of voice. He scowled at the intruder in disgust.

"I tire of this conversation. To me, my fledglings, to vict-"

A stored Shabon Spray Freezing interrupted the vampire's speech, burying him under a layer of ice before he could react. The lightning bolt shattering his prison at the very same moment definitely did not miss and turned the monster into a blazing humanoid torch. Ami's elation was short-lived, however. Before the vampire had finished burning to ash, a wave of red, consisting of many individual teleportation flares, illuminated the room during one of the dim phases of the glowing dungeon heart. In its wake remained rows of grinning, pale individuals dressed in flowing robes of black and red. All had prominent fangs protruding over their lower lips. The blue-haired girl felt a nauseating wave of sheer mind-numbing terror upon seeing the forces arrayed against her. Her visor beeped and provided their count: 72, helpfully pointing out exactly how hopelessly outclassed she really was.

The vampires didn't leave her time to let the shock sink in. Some glided through the air and toward the pulsating heart of the dungeon, bypassing her troops completely, but a larger group simply stormed

forward at the wall of golems. Animated statues went flying and shattered underneath the charge, doing nothing to slow the enemy down. In a desperate bid for time, Ami unleashed all of her stored freezing spells at her own dungeon heart, encasing it and any vampires that had been too close at the time in a massive pillar of glittering ice. Her troops were already gone, mowed down by the blindingly fast undead. Only Jadeite remained, bouncing vampires off of his bluish-glowing shield when they swooped at him like birds of prey. He was gritting his teeth and spreading his arms, palms facing outward. Ami thought fast. The golems were useless here. Another firestorm spell was the only option she could see as even marginally helpful. Bracing herself for the pain that repeating the spell so soon after the first cast would inflict on her, she picked her target area well. The expanding fireball incinerated a good number of the vampires chipping away at her dungeon heart's ice shell while not melting too much of it. The resulting ring of fire ignited a few more as it washed over them, and their pained howls permeated the air, along with black smoke and the scent of burning human flesh.

Not enough. Still not enough. Her head felt as if it was on fire too, and if she even attempted another of these spells, she would simply pass out. Jadeite faded in next to her and swatted a vampire out of the way with a wall of black energy. "Mercury, this is not working," he sputtered. His eyes rolled around wildly in their sockets as he tried to keep track of the black and red blurs that were the enemy, and which were striking from any conceivable angle, "I can't get an attack in like this!"

Ami opened her mouth to cast a fog, but at that moment, she heard a tinging noise and felt as if a tiny needle had pierced her racing heart. A hole gaped in the armour of ice, and that had been the first strike at her dungeon heart! "Shabon Spray Freezing!"

Another stab. Before she could see the results of her spell, she spotted a flash of red to her right, just behind the curly-haired blond floating next to her. "JADEITE! NO!"

The dark general's eyes widened in sudden pain as Zarekos' fangs pierced his jugular. The vampire - still alive - had appeared just behind the dark general and latched onto his back. Three more stabs and accompanying tinging noises, in the space of less than a

second. The emperor let out an enraged hiss when Ami bodily slammed into him, jabbing her armoured elbow into his ribs. It wasn't enough to completely dislodge him from his victim, but sufficient to contest Jadeite's status as his captive. That sufficed for Ami's purposes. Ting. Pain. In one of the blocked corridors far removed from the invading force, two figures appeared. The armoured golem toppled backward as a black, shadowy silhouette stepped out of it, catching the limp larger form in her tar-like arms. Ting. PAIN! Ami's green-glowing hand went to the man's blood-spurting neck wound. There was so much red! Wincing, she pressed her hand on the wet gash and mended the worst of the flesh. Another pang made her knees buckle. She couldn't continue on like this. Was he still breathing? Please be still alive! OW! Shivering in dread, the blue-haired girl concentrated. With a flash of blue and a flurry of snow, both crossed the distance between continents and landed at Snyder's feet. The young acolyte started in fright at the sight, but was instantly all business when he noticed the amount of blood. "Who's hurt?"

"Help him! Please help him!" Ami implored with tears in her eyes. In her mind's eye view of the remote dungeon, the crystal was being hammered by blows, and she felt each one like a scratch to her own heart. The orb was compensating for damage in the same way that her golems did, by shrinking. As it lost in size, its heart rate increased. By now, it was emitting a near-constant light.

"I will." The white-and-red clad young man knelt down next to the patient and started a healing prayer even before he had settled down solidly.

Ami felt the exact moment that the dungeon heart shattered under the abuse. It was as if a strong breeze that only she could feel had picked up and was tearing at her body. She felt herself pulled away. Frightened, she grabbed onto the carpet, to no avail. Her knuckles went white from the strain as she clawed at the ground, but still she was dragged onward. Her fingers left a long, red-stained furrow in the fluffy woven fibres. Blood. Jadeite's blood. Snyder's brown eyes had gone round and were looking at Mercury with alarm. His hand reached out toward her, and she made a desperate grab for it, but her fingers went right through his, as if they had no substance at all.

Too soon, she lost her grip completely and felt herself screaming across space. "NOOOOoooooo!"

In the command centre, Cathy stared in consternation at the main screen, which showed a projection of the destroyed dungeon heart. A solid oval of purest light-devouring blackness hovered above the shard-covered dais, lashing out at its surroundings with tendrils of white energy. Suddenly, a short female form plummeted toward it from above, to the jeers and cheers of the vampires still milling about. For a moment, Ami's wide-open eyes seemed to meet the swordswoman's, two blue pools filled with pure horror that pleaded for help that wouldn't come. Then, darkness swallowed them along with the rest of the girl.

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Into the Darkness (DARK)

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Ami plummeted feet first through the black wound in space that hovered above her destroyed dungeon heart. Passing through felt like splashing into ice-cold water, and the horror-stricken girl found herself hurled into deepest darkness. Her wide-open eyes focused on the glowing circle she had just passed through. From this side, it was bright, and it receded far too quickly as she tumbled through space, resembling the moon, then a star, and finally disappeared completely. Bands of blue light shimmered around her right hand and arm, still extended from when she had held onto the carpet for dear life, its fingers cramped from the effort and sporting boils from rug burn. The ribbons of blue faded away, and then there was nothing but purest, featureless darkness. She heard sound, but it was only her own scream of fear and protest ringing in her ears.

Stop. Panic will not help! The blue-haired girl shut her mouth with an audible click. *What had that glow been?* Ami looked down at herself, which accomplished nothing in the complete absence of light. There was rustling in the dark as she patted herself down, which sounded obscenely loud in the dead silence. *A skirt?* her fingers fumbled around until they touched the seam of the garment, finding that it went down to below her knee. Not her senshi uniform. *Could it be?* Her hands wandered upward, feeling unexpected but familiar cloth, and encountered a ribbon. *My school uniform? I'm back to regular Mizuno Ami, rather than Sailor Mercury? Just great.* She felt like crying. She was floating powerlessly in a sea of dark nothingness. Her fingers crumpled up the ribbon on her blouse in despair. Suddenly, they froze as the terrified teenager noticed the absence of something she had taken for granted, and stopped to listen. The silence was deafening.

M-My heart isn't beating! Ami started at the realisation, only now noticing the absence of all the other sounds that her body produced by simply living, and which she wasn't even consciously aware of normally. *I'm not breathing either? Am I dead?* The schoolgirl felt a

sudden wave of despair as she imagined herself stuck in this cold, featureless nothing forever. *No, I have to think about this logically. I still have dungeon hearts left, so I should be able to return.* Ami brought her right index finger up to her lips and moistened it. She waved the digit around. *No change in temperature. Is there no air in this place? But how can I still hear or speak?* Given this new information, she was inclined to believe, for the moment, that her current state of seeming lifelessness was a precautionary measure to protect her body from the conditions in this strange place. Slowly, she was calming down after the mind-numbing terror of the last few minutes. How fast everything had gone completely wrong. The dungeon hearts, Jadeite... she needed to get back!

"Mercury Power, Make Up!"

Nothing changed. Ami was still just Ami, not her super-powered self. She cried out the transformation phrase a second and a third time, with a similar lack of results. What could she do? She fished for the Mercury computer, but the magic that summoned it from where it went when she didn't use it failed to respond to her call, and she massaged her temples in frustration. She wished she could see, or at least know whether she was at rest or still drifting. *Maybe regular magic?* None of the incantation she knew did anything, but at least the sound of her voice was a comforting sensation in this silence, and banished part of her unease.

There had to be a way to get out of this. If her senshi powers didn't work, how about her Keeper ones? The drifting teenager tried to remember what Malleus knew about losing a dungeon heart. Hazy memories of falling through the darkness for an indeterminate but long period of time flashed through her mind. With sudden dread, she remembered the rest of what she had filed away as a bad dream, and if her heart had been functional, it would have beaten faster in fright. An impression of impacting something leathery and callused. Standing up from the surface that felt like a wet sponge and looking around with a sense that wasn't sight. The sudden shift as she - no, Malleus - recognised the five crooked, pointy-tipped towers surrounding this plain as fingers the size of mountains. A strange mixture of religious awe and sheer terror upon looking up and seeing a face like a small moon hanging over the city-sized

hand, the gruesome visage's details thankfully shrouded by the distance. Caught up in the moment, Ami muttered the name associated with the menacing being at the same time as her memory-self did. "Murdrul the Devourer." The clawed hand hurled Malleus back the way he had come with a dismissive flick.

Ami shivered and looked around despite the futility of it, her hair standing on end. The dark gods were here? Well, not *right* here, but the knowledge was unpleasant enough. Her thoughts went back to the memory fragment. The late Keeper had been able to perceive his surroundings, even if the sense he was using wasn't vision. Keeper sight? Trying couldn't hurt, and suddenly, Ami had a very precise idea of what she looked like, and confirmed that she was indeed back in her school uniform. Ami smiled briefly at her progress. Keeper powers at least seemed still functional. Partially functional, she amended when a picture of either of her dungeons failed to form in her mind, despite her best efforts. She kept trying, however, as meditation was the only thing she could really do in this cold, formless void. She didn't know how long she worked on the acuity of her Keeper sense, but faintly at first, she sensed two incredibly distant pinpricks of light that felt like *her*, and which were receding by the minute. They could only be her dungeon hearts, but Ami felt another flare of panic when she realised that she was moving away from them! How could she get back?

Ami went for the quick and logical option, and tried to transport herself in the right direction with her Keeper powers. Her face fell when she couldn't even disappear from her current spot, much less teleport herself in the right direction. It was a sensation akin to the one she felt on foreign, claimed territory, but infinitely stronger. What could she do? She still counted as her own territory, but teleporting into herself was an absurd idea, and probably fatal too, even if it worked by some strange twist of space. Well, she also had the ability to move things within her territory. While the scientist in her rebelled at the idea of something moving by pushing against itself, she still forced herself to consider the idea properly. Could she manoeuvre by pushing against one of her bones with her telekinesis - very cautiously, of course? Only one way to find out. It was an odd sensation, as if a hook was attached to her breastbone and pulling. Using her dungeon hearts as a frame of reference, she compared

their relative velocities with hers. It was working! She was braking her descent away from them! If she kept up the acceleration, she would slow down, stop, and reverse direction!

With new hope, Ami focused her efforts on the tasks at hand, elation warming her. She paused. No, this wasn't just a subjective feeling, it had gotten warmer. She looked in the direction she had been falling, and saw, with her real eyes, that the darkness was no longer all-encompassing. The empty space where the horizon should have been was a shade of red so close to black that it would have been impossible to tell the difference, if the environment had been any brighter. Ami knew with every fibre of her being that she did not want to go that way. *Is this where the dark gods lurk?* the girl wondered, her thoughts straying back to the enormous, bloated and horned *thing* she had seen in the stolen memory. In the same instant, she felt the attention of something hungry, powerful, and tremendously malicious turn into her direction, seeking. Instinctively, she curled up into a ball and wrapped her arms tightly around herself, trying to make herself as small as possible. How else could she hide in an empty place like this?

"Who remembers my ancient enemy?" A voice like thunder challenged, hitting the frightened girl like a physical blow.

Ami's pupils turned into little pinpricks as she recognised the voice and the oppressive charge that was building up in the air. *Azzathra,* she realised. As if summoned by his name, the dark god was suddenly there and aware of her. Ami knew this, even if she didn't understand how.

"Oh. It's just *you*," the gravelly, merciless voice snorted. "Still the same pathetic worm as ever, I see."

Ami uncurled, trying to hide her terror. She could feel the power roll off the thing, buffeting her with its mere presence. It seemed to be behind her and to the left. Despite the danger she was currently in, Ami turned her Keeper sight in the direction, morbidly curious about what form this dark god had taken.

"You *dare* look at me?" Azzathra bellowed in anger, and suddenly Ami's mental vision burnt. She craned her neck and leaned back as

she screamed in agony at what felt like a hot poker being shoved into her inner eye.

"What a pleasant sound," the dark god chuckled, a noise that felt like spider legs scratching over Ami's skin. "Let's hear it again!"

A new spike of pain hit the defenceless girl. Foregoing the safety of prudently applied pressure, she fought through the agony and hurled herself away from the monster and toward her dungeon hearts as fast as her Keeper power would allow. They still seemed so far away!

Behind her, Azzathra growled, and his malignant power pulsed. "I have not allowed you to leave yet." The dark god did something that Ami couldn't perceive properly. Still twitching from the after-effects of the evil deity's last attack, she watched with horror as one of her two guiding lights in the distant darkness dimmed until she could no longer find it. The fiend let out a growl of angry confusion as the second one refused his touch. The fleeing schoolgirl could feel his rage grow hot like a furnace. "Here I thought you had learned your lesson, but still you seek to betray us. Suffer!"

The sheer agony that Ami felt made the previous pains seem like a caress in comparison. She squealed hoarsely, not even able to consider putting up a brave façade while her veins felt as if the blood within had been replaced with molten metal. When she was able to think coherently again, she had lost sight of her dungeon heart from the lack of concentration. Even as she searched for it again, shaking with fear, she begged "No, please stop! ARGH!"

"Where is she?" Cathy asked, not for the first time as she paced up and down the room like a caged tiger. "When will she be back? Snyder!"

The acolyte scratched his head. "I am actually not sure. The texts of Saint Laneas mention that a defeated Keeper falls into deepest darkness and is banished forever from the land."

"Which is obviously bullshit, seeing how Arachne came back," Jered

said quickly, hoping to reassure his girlfriend.

"Well, um, at his time, city states were the norm, so 'land' should probably not be taken quite literally. I am sure she will pull through, she is a smart girl."

"Yes, and she's really great at this dungeon keeping stuff," Cathy snapped, the vertical scar on her right cheek turning into a distorted curve as the corners of her mouth pulled downwards in worry. "Did you ever consider that she might have no idea how to come back?"

The room fell silent while the others considered this. "Is there some way we can help her?" Jered asked, brushing back his wavy brown hair that had gotten caught in the collar of his shirt.

"I have already tried contacting her with those eye things, but it didn't work, and the scrying balls show nothing but black," the blonde replied, balling her fists in frustration.

"Maybe- " Snyder's guess was cut of by a startled blink when every imp in sight suddenly keeled over and dissolved into specks of green.

Jumping up from his seat, Jered shouted "What the hell just happened?" He threw a confused glance at the swordswoman, only to find her gone and the door wide open, while rapid footsteps disappeared down the corridor. Everywhere, the torches were dimming and slowly going out.

"Unfortunately, I don't know what exactly is going on," the white-and-red-robed acolyte admitted as he scratched his head, looking at the dungeon heart. "It is certainly still alive and active, but I am missing the fountain of glowing motes above the pit." Before him, the membrane of the artefact was beating at a slower pace than normal, but its thumping heartbeat sounded just as strong as usual.

Cathy chewed on her lower lip as she thought. Suddenly, her eyes flow open. "Snyder, where's Jadeite? I have an idea!"

The redhead shrank away from the intensity of her stare. "He's in his

room, but he's still weak from blood loss," the priest-in-training replied.

"But moving and doing magic won't kill him?" the blonde asked, storming off when the round-eyed acolyte confirmed this.

Two blonde figures, about the same size, shimmered into existence within a domed chamber that glittered like a jewel in the light of the four-posted crystal dungeon heart. The longer-haired one wearing a blue senshi uniform let go of the one in a grey uniform, and stormed toward the pulsing white orb resting on a dais in the chamber.

"You could at least have let me grab something warmer to wear," Jadeite protested, wrapped in a blanket. At least he didn't need a shawl with all the bandages wrapped around his neck up to his jaw. He was holding his head stiffly as he walked towards the swordswoman, whose shadow on the wall reached from floor to ceiling as she climbed the stairs up to the dungeon heart itself and stood in front of the light source.

Cathy put both her palms firmly on the smooth, warm surface of the crystal sphere and called "Mercury? Mercury! Can you hear me? Mercury!"

"That's the extent of your plan?" Jadeite asked incredulously as he joined her on top of the dais and leaned against one of the pillars, crossing his arms.

"Shush, I think I hear something," the short-skirted blonde chastised him.

"... help! ... lost ... can't find... AIIIE!"

"Mercury! Listen! This way!" Cathy shouted again, then turned to Jadeite. "She's hurting and lost and needs our help! Come here and help!"

"What am I supposed to do?" he grumbled, but complied with no further protest. The dungeon heart seemed to pulse faster when his hands touched the nacre-like shell. "Sailor Mercury, come this way,"

he said tentatively.

"...being attacked... ARGH ... far ... can't see..."

The dark general frowned, wondered what this awful feeling in his chest was. He felt an obligation to save her, he decided after a moment of reflection. She *had* saved him from certain death earlier, after all. It was only natural that he wanted to repay his debt. Yes. "Mercury, don't give up, we are waiting for you here. You can do it!" *I'm starting to sound like this Tuxedo Mask dweeb*, Jadeite thought with a shudder.

"You heard him! This way!" Cathy agreed at his side, trying to sound hopeful.

The curly-haired blond doubted the effectiveness of what they were doing. Sure, talk cost nothing, but he felt that something more effective was required here. Hmm, maybe...? It was a crazy idea, but it might just work. He still had the human energy he had drained before Beryl banished him, stashed aside for a rainy day. Well, he didn't have a better plan. Maybe it would distract whatever was after her. "Mercury, see if you can use this!" That said, he offered the stolen lifeforce to the pulsing crystal orb, which had no compunctions about sucking it straight out of his hands as fast as he was releasing it.

"Mercury?" Cathy asked, after the young Keeper hadn't responded for a while.

Jadeite tried his luck once again, too, and felt silly for shouting at a large glowing sphere. "The dungeon heart is in this direction! Follow the energy!"

The heart dimmed and brighten once more, but suddenly, there was a shadow moving within. Small, soft hands emerged between Jadeite's gloved palms, shooting forward. In the blink of an eye, the head and shoulders of the short-haired girl followed as she came flying out of the orb, slamming into the dark general and sending him reeling. He would have recovered his balance, had the girl not clung to him like a barnacle, wrapping her arms around his torso. With the added weight, he staggered backward until his back collided with

one of the dungeon heart's pillars, whereupon he lost the fight against gravity. He slid to the ground, his back upright against the column, while the girl landed on his lap, still firmly attached. His angry outcry died on his lips when he looked down at the blue-haired head whose face was currently buried in his chest. Was this girl really Sailor Mercury? She was dressed all wrong. He looked at her trembling back. Some kind of school uniform. From Tokyo. This fragile teenager making quiet sobbing noises was a senshi?

Cathy's hand went to the haft of the sword hanging from her girdle, but hesitated. Blue-haired girl coming out of Mercury's dungeon heart, same size and age, but dressed in strange garb she had only seen once in Mercury's crystal ball. It couldn't be her, but at the same time it *had* to be her. The disguise magic failed, and suddenly she recognised the young Keeper. "Mercury!" she shouted in relief, running to her side. "Mercury, are you all right?"

The girl sitting on Jadeite's lap did not react. To Cathy's exasperation, the dark general threw her a wide-eyed, confused look and raised his hands in a shrug-like gesture, hindered by the arms of the shaken Mercury holding onto him as if her life depended on it. Rolling her eyes, the long-haired blonde pantomimed a hug with her arms. The dark general looked dubious, but slowly put his arms around Ami's slender torso, moving as if she could explode at any moment. When their warm weight settled on Mercury's back, the chattering of her teeth quieted down, but the sniffling and muffled sobbing sounds continued.

"There, there. It's all right. You are back with us now," Cathy made all the right soothing noises, knelt down next to the two, and stroked the younger girl's hair. "Everything will be all right." *This could take a while,* she thought, feeling great sadness at the sight.

Jadeite didn't really know what to make of the situation. The hug was kind of nice, actually. Especially in this cold. Well, except for the crying, that made him uncomfortable in a way that he didn't fully understand. She was messing up his blanket with all those tears, too. "You will be fine," he said, taking another cue from the swordswoman, who seemed more apt at handling situations like these. Looking down at the weeping girl in his arms, he felt another emotion well up, one that he was much more familiar with. He would

hurt those bloodsuckers, and not just for the wound they had inflicted on him!

Ami, despite being in a warm, comforting hug, still heard the parting promise of Azzathra echo in her mind.

"You will return sooner than you think," the sadistic voice disappearing back into the depths behind her had taunted, "and I will make sure to be the one who collects you!"

On the back of her right hand, which currently rested over Jadeite's spine, an orange ring surrounding a disc of same colour opened as a countdown started.

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Dread

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The white light of the dungeon heart penetrated deeply into the carved ice that formed the walls and vaulted ceiling of the chamber. With each pulse, the substance glowed greenish-blue from within and sparkled like a rainbow where edges and geometric patterns in the transparent material broke the light into its component colours. Despite the spectacular lightshow, none of the three occupants of the room had any eyes for its beauty. Cathy stood on the dungeon heart's dais, blocking out the shine of the brightening and dimming orb and casting a shadow on Jadeite, who was sitting on the ground. Both blondes focused their attention on the small, blue-headed teenager on his lap, who had her arms wrapped around him in a hug.

Cathy shifted her weight from one leg to the other to prevent both from falling asleep. She had been waiting for a while now, and it seemed as if Mercury was finally calming down. At least, she had stopped sobbing audibly, and her back underneath the dark general's arms was no longer trembling so much. At this point, the swordswoman couldn't tell whether the shivers were from fear or from the cold permeating the room. The younger girl's head still rested against Jadeite's shoulders, and nothing indicated that she was planning to move any time soon. Cathy wondered what the curly-haired blond thought about the situation. His steel-blue eyes were narrowed as if he was mulling something over while he looked past the girl in his arms.

The long-haired blonde squatted down next to the others, estimating that the short-haired girl was no longer too agitated for communication. "Mercury," she called, causing Jadeite's gaze to focus on her, "are you all right, Mercury?"

The schoolgirl slowly raised her head from Jadeite's chest, revealing a wet spot on the blanket where her face had rested, and turned to look at Cathy with puffy red eyes. "Ami," she breathed in a voice so

low that the others had trouble hearing her.

"Sorry, what?" Cathy asked, leaning forward through the cloud of breath condensing in the air, closer toward the young Keeper.

"Ami. That's my name when I'm in this form," Ami explained "my real name." Being called by her civilian name was one little piece of normality she craved after her harrowing experiences in this world, and an attainable one at that. Besides, trying to maintain her secret identity when Jadeite had already seen her face already seemed silly. Especially when she was in his arms, holding on tight enough to feel his heartbeat through the layers of cloth between them. Her cheeks coloured faintly at being so close to the man she had a crush on, but she did not budge from her position. After Azzathra's torture, she was willing to indulge in all the comfort she could get, at least for the moment.

"What happened to you?" Cathy asked, keeping her voice warm and soothing. "That is, if you are willing to talk about it."

Ami grimaced unhappily, but nodded in agreement. Jadeite felt her tense up at the question and squeeze him tighter, as if he was some sort of oversized teddy-bear.

"After- " she paused until another shudder had passed, "after the vampires had destroyed my dungeon heart, I was drawn back to it and thrown into a world of complete darkness. Once I figured out the way out, Azzathra found me." She shivered once more and looked at the ground while Cathy gasped in surprise.

"Go on," the long-haired blonde encouraged gently.

"He seemed annoyed at first and hurt me for fun," Ami continued in a quiet voice, and felt a hand settle down on her shoulder in sympathy, "but then he did something to my dungeon hearts to prevent me from leaving, and found out he couldn't touch this one." Her eyes went to the nearby lamp-like sphere that beat in a regular rhythm. "That made him furious, and he started torturing me in earnest." Her eyes filled with tears . "I was thrown about and unable to think and couldn't find my way out, until I heard both of you. Thank you so much," she added, her voice breaking.

"We noticed that something was wrong with the dungeon heart," the swordswoman felt obliged to report, "all your imps died and the lights went dim."

Alarmed at the news, Ami spared a mental glance at her dungeon underneath the desert, and found to her relief that things were apparently back to normal now, except for the lack of imps that should have been scurrying through the corridors. "I- I see. The disruption seems to only have been temporarily, at least." She rested her cheek against Jadeite's chest again without consciously noticing what she was doing. "I was still lost, but then Jadeite did something and I felt enough of my magic return to attempt a teleport, which brought me close enough to my dungeon heart to escape."

"It's over now," Cathy comforted, seeing that the blue-haired girl was about to retreat back into her shell, but to the blonde's surprise, Ami shook her head vehemently, and a trace of anger, mixed with terror, marred her features.

"It's not," Ami whimpered, "it's not ever going to be over," she added in despair and finally let go of Jadeite to hide her face in her palms. The gesture brought the orange disc-and-open-circle mark on the back of her left hand into sight. "Azzathra made sure of that." She could feel the insidious alien magic spread out from the sigil and creep through her body, permeating every cell and making it impossible to forget that her time was so very, very limited. She had about a night and a day, the magic told her, and then... "I don't want to go back!" she blurted out and broke into sobs again.

"Mer- Ami! AMI! Don't let yourself be discouraged," Cathy shouted. The schoolgirl peered over the tips of the fingers she had been covering her eyes with when the insisting hand shaking her shoulder wouldn't go away.

Cathy met her gaze head-on and replied sternly "You can't give up! We prepared long and hard for the duel, and you can do this! I believe in you! If you give in to despair, Azzathra will have already won! You'll show him that things won't always go his way! Remember your armour? Between it and Jadeite's magic, that Reaper won't know what hit him! And Jered has been working on something to make the fight easier, too!"

Ami brushed the tears away as she let the swordswoman's words sink in. "You really think so?" she asked with a sad, disbelieving smile.

The scar-faced woman nodded enthusiastically and kicked Jadeite in the shin, out of sight of the blue-haired teenager. The dark general, who had been content to remain quiet and let the female soldier deal with the sentimental stuff, understood what she wanted. "I agree, don't sell yourself short. You have become fairly competent," *for a little girl* he didn't add. Even if she didn't feel all that little right now.

Ami's face regained some of it's colour when she realised that she was still sitting on the man's lap, and that his arms were still encircling her. "M-Maybe you are right," she stuttered, pressing her lips together into a more determined line. Her resolve hardened. "I won't fail!" she added. The consequences of failure were too terrible to consider.

Jadeite nodded. "That's better. Do whatever it will take to win!" That, at least, was advice he considered sensible, not just emotional drivel.

Later, Ami was tossing and turning in her bed, but sleep wouldn't come after her ordeal. The experience had been tremendously painful, but it didn't have any physical effects on her body, as far as she could tell. None that weren't symptoms of psychological problems, anyway. Finding sleep was not possible with the way her thoughts kept circling back to the dark world she had been banished to. She had been lucky, she supposed. That change to more reddish tones at the deepest point of her fall had not boded well, and after dwelling on it for far too long, she was sure that the darkness was only a zone of transition, leading to whatever hellish abodes the dark gods chose to dwell in. If only she hadn't drawn Azzathra's attention. His foreign magic thumped through her hand, burdening her with the certainty that the duel with the Reaper would take place tomorrow evening. The anxiety she felt about that weighed heavily enough on her to make it hard to breathe. Covers rustled as Ami slipped out from underneath them. Bare feet poking out of yellow pyjama legs

made contact with the rough carpet on the floor as the girl sat down on the edge of her mattress and rested her chin on her hands. With half-lidded eyes, she looked into the twilight of her room without really taking in any details.

If she couldn't sleep, then she could at least try to find a better solution for this problem. In her desperation, she even briefly considered amputating the hand that carried Azzathra's mark, but almost immediately discarded the notion. She could feel the evil magic adhere to her like an oily coating, and just getting rid of the visible manifestation shining forth from the back of her left hand would not get rid of the contamination. No, at the appointed time, she would be whisked away to a duel she really doubted she could win. And if she failed, she would be tormented by Azzathra forever, if the fiend managed to snatch up her soul when she died. Ami suppressed a renewed sob. There was one alternative she hadn't allowed herself to really think about. The Light gods had informed her that, if she took up worship of a dark god, her soul would go to that specific one, which would at least keep her safe from Azzathra. What the other dark gods would do with her, she didn't know, but imagined it wouldn't be pleasant. They weren't the gods of evil for nothing, and from what little she had managed to pick up about them, differed only in what kinds of torments they reserved for the dead. Well, and then there was Metallia, who seemed to be a complete unknown in this world.

As far as choices for a dark god to worship went, Ami could hardly do better. First, Metallia was as good as dead and in no shape to order her around, at least for a while. Second, the senshi knew where to physically find the dark goddess. Third, Metallia was not in that horrible place where Ami's powers didn't work. Her muscles clenched involuntarily at the memory of the pain she had experienced at the hands of Azzathra, and she clamped her teeth together to choke an involuntary whimper that was rising in her throat. *Can't go back there! Can't risk ending up there forever!* her mind screamed, and she panted in fear at the mere memory. With her arms wrapped around herself and her nails digging into her shoulders, Ami sat on her bed and shivered. The orange ring on the back of her hand had turned into an open half moon, reminding her of the merciless passage of time that was bringing the lethal Reaper

duel closer with each passing second. It wasn't that she feared death, it was what came after that terrified her. If Azzathra collected her... No, she had to avoid that fate at all costs! Ami leaned back, steadying herself with her arms against the rumpled covers of her bed, and looked at the ceiling. She dreaded the cost of aligning herself with Metallia. *What if I am no longer myself if I start worshipping her? What if she forces me to fight my friends? Usagi, Rei, Luna...*

She closed her eyes, shutting out the dim light of the torches in the room, and for a fleeting moment, she believed herself back in the dark world. Her eyelids flew open, revealing pupils that had shrunk to the size of pinheads. Ami disappeared from her bed, making the springs in her mattress squeak as it jumped due to the sudden absence of her weight, and retching noises could be heard from the nearby bathroom. Leaning against the cold, white-tiled wall, Ami caught a glimpse of her reflection in the wall mirror. Her blue bangs hung limply and disorderly in front of her face, and she had dark rings under her eyes, accentuated by the pallor of her skin. *I'm starting to look like a vampire myself. I can't go on like this. I just can't!* Ami sucked in her breath and balled her fists as she decided on a course of action. She would have to do it. Her cheeks burned with shame as she looked at the ground. It was a selfish decision, but she was afraid, so terribly afraid. And if worst came to worst and Metallia awakened, she could at least leverage whatever influence she had to keep those she cared about safe.

"Mercury Power, Make Up!" Blue light flared, cleansing the girl at least from the external signs of the previous day. She dressed quickly in her black and gold dungeon keeper garb and set out to put things into motion before her courage left her. There was one thing she had to do first, just in case she would not be able to later. The risk that worshipping Metallia would mess with her mind was one she was - barely - willing to take, given the situation, but she wouldn't spring something dangerous like that as a surprise on her unsuspecting friends. She stared unblinkingly at the crystal ball resting on the bench in front of her, inviting her to use it. With a gulp, she steeled herself and channelled her magic into the scrying device. The milky clouds swirling within cleared to reveal a darkened room with traditional paper walls. Ami could see a raven-haired girl

sleeping peacefully with her usually long tresses bundled up for the night so they wouldn't get in the way. *Please wake up Rei,* Ami thought as she gazed at the picture of her friend. As if the shrine maiden had heard her plea, she opened her eyes and frowned into the darkness. Her hand instinctively went to where she normally kept her prayer strips, before she realised what was going on and blinked the sleep out of her eyes.

"Ami?" Rei formed the letters of the name soundlessly with her mouth as she sat up and searched for a pen and paper. She glanced sourly at the alarm clock on the bedside cabinet, whose hands indicated that it was well after midnight. Her scowl vanished as quickly as it had appeared, making room for lines of worry. *Ami wouldn't be trying to contact me in the middle of the night if it wasn't important.* The longer the shrine maiden sat there and meticulously noted down the length of the intervals during which she could feel the presence of Ami's tainted magic, the more her unease intensified. As she translated the rows of dots and lines on the paper, illuminated by the yellowish light of her bedside lamp, her eyes widened in alarm, and she reached for her pen so fast that she flicked it to the ground. Grumbling, she fumbled for it under the bed and wrote down her reply in big, angry letters so that her misguided friend could read it easily. "Ami, you are smarter than that! Please reconsider! Don't join our enemies!"

A world away, the senshi in question read the words in her scrying ball and let out a long sigh before she sent her answer. The sphere in front of her flickered as she activated it in intervals to telegraph letters of the Morse alphabet across dimensions.

"Please believe me, Rei. I wouldn't consider aligning myself with Metallia if I had any better options left. This is perhaps the hardest decision I had to ever make, and I'm sorry that it had to come to this. I simply have no alternatives. I miss you, Usagi and Luna terribly. Please tell them that, in case I should no longer be able to. If everything goes well, I will contact you later today."

The next part of the message was the hardest to compose, and Ami's neck muscles visibly tightened as she swallowed. She could taste bile in the back of her throat as she sent the painful rest of what she needed to say "I can't be sure that I will still be in control of

myself after what happens next, so please do not blindly trust any message I may send after this one." There. She had now severely damaged her friends' confidence and trust in her.

Rei was taking this better than Ami had expected, though. The raven-haired girl's face reddened as she ground her teeth together and scowled fiercely. Her reply on the paper was a single word, underlined three times, the last time so hard that the pen had pierced the sheet. "WHY?"

That at least was something that Ami didn't mind explaining, and she spent the next hour informing Rei about her miserable situation with Azzathra and the upcoming duel with the Reaper, promising to contact her again during the week following the duel, if she was able to. If she wasn't, she would be either dead or brainwashed. Both of these possible outcomes left the pyjama-clad shrine maiden looking nearly as sorrowful as Ami felt.

"Don't worry, Ami! You will pull through in the end! And if not, we won't give up until we find a way to save you, I promise!" Rei's last answer, while groundlessly optimistic, raised Mercury's spirits somewhat. While the blue-haired girl didn't entirely dare believe in it, as the memory of Azzathra's aura of power was still fresh in her mind, she knew that Rei did. It felt good to know that her friends wouldn't abandon her, even knowing what she was about to do. Sighing once again into the silence of the room, Ami slowly stood up and straightened her clothes. There was no more reason to delay this.

The sound of Ami's knuckles banging against the door to Jadeite's room echoed through the deserted halls of the dungeon. To her, the noise sounded like thunder, loud enough to wake the dead. She glanced left and right furtively, as if afraid that Cathy, Snyder or Jered would walk around the bend at any moment now, attracted by the knocking. She didn't wish to explain her reasoning twice in the same night, as she had a feeling that her arguments would feel even flimsier and less convincing if she had to present them in person. Yes, she was avoiding confrontation, but she just couldn't bear any more of it. Not today. Not so soon after encountering Azzathra.

She heard rustling behind the door, which swung open with a faint creak. Her heart hammered in her chest when Jadeite's face appeared in the gap, looking decidedly grumpy. His uniform looked rumpled, as if he had thrown it on in a hurry. Ami felt her cheeks grow hot as her thoughts strayed to how she had clung to him a while ago. Thankfully, he hadn't commented on it, or she felt she would have died from mortification. His steel-blue eyes widened nearly imperceptibly as he recognised his visitor, and his posture straightened.

"Mercury?" he greeted, making it sound like a question.

Ami looked down, noting in passing that he wasn't wearing boots. He must have been sleeping. "Jadeite. Excuse me for disturbing you so late, but I have need of your knowledge."

"I am at your service," the dark general said. If he was annoyed at the disturbance, he didn't show it. Instead, he was measuring Ami with a calculating glance. "I see you have turned back into Sailor Mercury form. What do you require of me?"

The girl inclined her head even deeper. She looked up through her bangs as she spoke "I need protection from Azzathra," she began speaking haltingly. "I just can't bear the thought of ending up with that monster again, and in light of tomorrow..." she trailed off, voice choking.

Going out on a limb, Jadeite copied one of the gestures he had seen Cathy use this afternoon, and put a hand on Mercury's shoulder. Startled at the unexpected touch, she jerked, but didn't pull away. In fact, her posture seemed more relaxed than before, even if she still wasn't looking directly at him. *Hmm, promising.* "So you need Queen Metallia's power," the dark general concluded. Nothing else he knew about would be relevant to the problem at hand.

"Yes," Ami confirmed with a shiver. "What do I need to do?" she came straight to the point.

The curly-haired blond removed his arm from her shoulder and fell into the same tone he used when he taught her magic. The familiarity of his lecturing voice calmed the young senshi a little,

even if the topic did not. "First, you will need to prepare an offering."

"Life energy?" there was a definite undercurrent of distaste swinging in Mercury's question.

"Indeed," Jadeite confirmed. "It is the one thing other than the ginzuishou that she craves. Don't underestimate its usefulness, it is what let you escape from Azzathra in the first place."

Ami's head shot up, and she looked at him, frozen like a deer in the headlight. "Y-you mean what brought my magic back was... ?" she asked, paling and feeling her stomach turn. The worst thing was that she couldn't help consider it *completely worth it*. Panting, she swallowed her revulsion at the notion. She should have known. After all, she had read enough treatises on necromancy to know that the life of others could be used to invigorate one's own power. At least, she knew that Jadeite didn't kill his victims. They would be fine, after a while. At least so she hoped. And hadn't she done something similar once before, when she bribed the dark gods? She had no room to judge him. Once Ami's legs stopped shaking, she nodded. "I see," she said, "I will acquire some at once."

Jadeite's smile as the Keeper disappeared didn't reach his eyes. Aside from the - admittedly huge - complication of the impending Reaper duel, his plans were progressing nicely. Yes, this partnership with Sailor Mercury had potential. *Watch out Beryl.*

Chains clanked as the horned demon tore at his arm-thick restraints, making no more progress than he had in the weeks before. Unlike the other times Ami had visited him, his yellow eyes lit up in sudden glee when the young Keeper appeared, rather than the blind fury she was used to.

"So *you* are going to be my opponent!" the red-skinned monster broke into roaring laughter. "Praise the Dark Gods!" he growled, fixing his gaze on the orange pattern blemishing the skin of Mercury's left hand. An identical mark shone forth from his own. "I will *finally* end you, you little brat! Your days are numbered!" His thin lips split into a wide grin, revealing long, pointy fangs.

Mercury approached with slow, measured steps, keeping her face expressionless. Only the intensity of the red light shining out of her irises betrayed her rising irritation.

"Oh, I will savour standing over your savaged, lifeless body. I will take my sweet time killing you." The Reaper's Neanderthal-like eyebrows rose as the slender girl came even closer and reached for his belly. In a higher-pitched voice than before, he growled, "Now wait, you know that Azzathra will simply kill you too if you - ARRhhhgh!"

"Let's see if Azzathra can heal *that*," Ami said in a voice as cold as the grave, watching his bulky form go limp and his oversized chin sink down and come to a rest on his collarbone. His large metal pauldrons rattled as he collapsed like a marionette with its strings cut, and then there was silence. The swirling ball of life energy that she had ripped out of the creature hovered over her palm, causing a prickling sensation on her skin. Its fiery glow seemed warmer than human life energy, and Ami could feel it radiate phantom heat as its light stained her pale features orange. Her eyes blazed with satisfaction, and a subtle smirk flitted over her lips. If she had to sacrifice some life energy to Metallia during the ritual, she would at least take it from someone she hated.

In the flickering orange-tinted light, the heap of chicken bones taking up the right wall of the cell seemed alive as the shadows swayed. Ami spared it a glance and turned her attention back to the Reaper. Her attempts at fattening the beast up hadn't been very successful. The waist bulged out a bit, sure, and she could no longer make out every muscle underneath the leathery skin, but overall, he utterly failed to appear plump and slow. With a last glare at the unconscious demon, she vanished from the prison.

There had not been a temple to the dark gods in Ami's dungeon since Azzathra had ruined the existing one, which had been consecrated to his now-dead enemy, Murdrul the Devourer. Not that the senshi would have wanted to keep a place so steeped in the blood and suffering of the innocents, anyway. The shattered pillars and emptied sacrificial basin were buried and forgotten under tons of

stone and sand, which suited her just fine. However, it left her without a convenient place of worship. Fortunately, Jadeite had been able to propose a different way of contacting the ruling entity of the Dark Kingdom.

The room around the Keeper and the dark general held no lights, except for a crystal ball illuminated by the cloudy swirls within, and the ball of stolen life energy still floating above Ami's palm. In its dim light, only her chin and the lower edge of her blue bangs were visible. Above the nose, two large discs of red glowed in a strip of darkness. They moved to the right to look at Jadeite's silhouette, barely visible in the twilight.

"I know that Beryl feeds Queen Metallia energy through her crystal ball, but I suspect hers has additional powers. Nevertheless, the principle of catching the Great Ruler's attention through scrying on her is valid." At his left, Ami cringed as she remembered what had happened the last time she had tried to look at a dark god, but Jadeite did not notice. "As you already know, scrying attempts can be detected and followed back. Once you have Queen Metallia's attention, offer her the energy and make your plea."

Ami nodded, clenching her teeth. How far she had fallen that praying to a dark god was a step up from her current situation. Never had she dreamed that she would not only consider such a course of action as a theoretical possibility, but actually go through with it. Filled with doubt, she glanced up at Jadeite again, and could see his white teeth sparkle in the sparse light as he gave her reassuring smile. She felt her heart flutter and looked at the crystal ball with new determination. "Let's begin."

Guided by the blue-haired girl's magic, the mists within the sphere parted, and both observers leaned over it. The orb's whiteness turned into tones of deep blue and violet as an image formed within. A huge sculpture depicting the jaw-less skull of some huge, long-fanged monstrosity stared at them with empty eye sockets. Its features were ill-defined and asymmetric, as if it had grown naturally out of the surrounding rock, which only made it creepier. There was an empty hollow for a third eye in its forehead, in which a mote of fire quivered. An orange bag pervaded with darker veins hung from the mouth like a tongue, widening toward the bottom until it was

larger than the head above. It defied gravity as it hung over an abyss filled with rolling black clouds and glowed softly from within, except for a shadow at its very centre.

"That's Queen Metallia?" Ami asked, unsure of what exactly she was looking at. She had expected something more recognisably alive.

"Her cocoon," Jadeite explained in a hushed voice, "she is still recovering."

"Queen Metallia," Ami called out into the hungry silence, "please bestow your favour upon me! I pray to you and ask you to accept me as your worshipper. Please accept this gift of life energy as a sacrifice!"

At first, nothing happened, and Ami already thought she had failed, but movement drew her gaze down onto the sun-like ball she held. A tendril of energy was snaking toward the crystal ball, which went hazy once the energy made contact. The blue-haired girl imagined hearing a slurping sound as the scrying device sucked in the rest of the life force. Once the last of it was gone, the room was much darker than before. The image of Metallia's cocoon did not change in any appreciable way. Ami kept watching it like a hawk, but there was no reaction. After a while, she realised that none would be forthcoming. "Jadeite? Did it work?"

"Metallia accepted your offering, that much is clear," the dark general answered guardedly. He raised his hand, and the turquoise crystal lights came back on.

"I don't feel any different," Ami wondered, half in relief and half in fear while looking down at herself, as if expecting a change. When she inspected her hands, she saw that the orange mark was still present, and felt a pang of harsh disappointment. A hope that she hadn't even admitted to herself was dashed.

Jadeite crossed his arms and sounded vaguely amused. "Why would you expect to? You came to our Great Ruler out of your own free will, why would she waste her precious energy on changing you?"

"Well, I had kind of expected at least *some reaction*," Ami confessed and stepped in front of a conjured full length mirror. A moment later, she had her computer out and was busily scanning away while lines of text scrolled over her visor.

Seeing the young girl hide a yawn behind her hand, the curly-haired blond stepped closer. "You should get some sleep. You need to be well-rested for your battle. Do this later," he advised, strongly enough to make it sound like a command.

Ami sighed and let her shoulders droop. "I can't," she sighed. "Whenever I close my eyes, I'm back with Azzathra, reliving the memories. I feel so lost and helpless and can't fall asleep. Much better to spend the time working instead."

Jadeite waved his hand in a dismissive way. "I think I can help with that."

Ami suddenly felt her heart hammer in her chest. *Could he be offering... ?* A sudden, pleasant mental image of going to sleep safely in his arms, while her head rested on his uniformed chest, went through her treacherous mind.

"I can cast a sleeping spell on you, if you like," he continued, unaware of what the teenager had been expecting. The sudden colour shooting to her cheeks was therefore somewhat puzzling to him.

Ami nodded. It was a sound suggestion, but she still felt vaguely cheated. She would need all her strength in tomorrow's battle, so she agreed. "I'd like that."

When the duo reappeared in Ami's room, the door was slightly ajar.

"And what have you two been up to?" a lively voice asked from the high-backed armchair in the corner, next to the teenager's reading desk.

Ami started and whirled around. "Cathy! What are you doing here?"

"Well, I was trying to check up on you to see how you were holding up. Imagine my surprise when I found that you were missing. And now I surprise you sneaking *him* into your room. Is there something you want to tell me?" Her voice was teasing, but the look she threw at Jadeite was all unpleasant business.

"N-no!" Ami sputtered, "I couldn't sleep, so he was going to cast a sleeping spell on me! Right?" she hadn't even considered what this would look like to an outside observer. The timid girl fled, rushing out through the door leading into the adjacent bathroom.

"Sleeping spell?" Cathy raised an eyebrow at the dark general, who crossed his arms defensively. He had known Beryl to use similar inflection when she was displeased with something and wouldn't come straight out with what, instead letting the accused dig themselves in deeper. So he remained quiet, and an uneasy silence permeated the room until Ami peeked out from the bathroom door, clad in a modest yellow pyjama, and made her way over to the bed in a hurry. She pulled the covers up to her neck, and glanced at Jadeite. "Okay."

The man walked over to her bedside and held out his hand, prompting her to touch it. A short flash of blackness later, she was soundly asleep. Jadeite stepped back, but found that he had first to gently pry loose the slim fingers intertwined with his own. That done, he glanced over at Cathy, who was still lurking in the corner like a big, vigilant watchdog. A soft whimper from the sleeping girl drew his gaze back to her, and he saw that her hands were clawing at her covers. He took a step further away, raising his open hands as if to say "I didn't do anything!"

Suddenly, the mattress creaked, and Jadeite found himself sitting on it, with no idea how he had gotten there. A warm arm snaked around his waist, and he looked dumbfounded at the long-haired blonde in the corner, who blinked at him in surprise as she observed from afar. With a shrug, Jadeite commenced the process of extricating himself from the peacefully slumbering girl without waking her. Half a minute later, he had completed his task under Cathy's watchfully glaring gaze, and was making his way to the door. In the bed, Ami turned to her side, shivering quietly at the absence of warmth, and in an eyeblink, Jadeite felt himself yanked back through space toward

where he had just left. When he felt a short-haired head abuse his arm as a pillow and heard a contented sigh, his left eyebrow started to twitch. This could become *complicated*. From the corner, he heard a muffled choking noise, as if Cathy wasn't sure whether she should be giggling like a loon or sigh in exasperation.

In front of the sacred fire, Rei was staring at the translucent image floating in the flame, barely believing what she was seeing. Agitated by Ami's transmission, she had been unable to return to sleep. Instead, she had given in to the urge of checking whether the studious girl was really all right, and she was glad that she had! It looked as if there were some things that Ami had neglected to mention. The black-haired girl let out a little growl, and the vision disappeared. Was there no limit to the depths these dark generals would sink to? First, Nephrite was toying with Usagi's friend Naru, and now, Jadeite was taking advantage of poor Ami's inexperience in matters of the heart. The cad. Unforgivable! The shrine maiden fumed, already thinking about what she would put into her next letter to her friend. If there was a next letter, she reminded herself, feeling the sudden anxiety quench the flames of her anger like a bucket of ice water.

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The Duel (DARK)

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Ami awoke from her slumber, feeling refreshed after a thankfully dreamless rest. The bed had *just* the right temperature, and the depressions in the mattress fit her body in that snug, comfortable manner that only ever happened mere moments before one had to get up in the morning. She didn't open her eyes just yet, content to drift right at the edge between dozing and wakefulness for a bit longer. Something seemed wrong with her pillow, though. It felt lumpier than usual, and the texture felt coarser against her right cheek than the fine linen she was used to. This brooked further investigation. Opening one eye halfway, Ami peered through her eyelashes at the offending mystery. Grey? Her pillow was a light blue colour, same as her covers! Alarmed, the teenager opened both eyes and traced the thin red line that went through the greyness to the collar - wait, collar? Her gaze shifted upward and came to rest on a male chin and blond curls, both of which she recognised. With a startled jerk, her head rose from the hollow of Jadeite's shoulder, alerting the man to her sudden wakefulness. "Jadeite?!"

Without the weight of the girl's head pinning down the dark general's arm, his already precarious balance on the edge on the bed shifted and lost the fight against gravity, and before he realised what was going on, he spilled onto the floor. Sitting on her bed with her covers drawn up to her chest with both hands, Ami blinked at the sprawled out, groaning figure on the ground with wide eyes. Her thoughts were racing as her face alternated in colour between red like a tomato and pale like a ghost. *What was he doing in my bed?* Now that her thoughts were a bit clearer, she noticed with relief that both of them were still fully dressed, so nothing too serious could have happened, but that didn't explain-

A quiet giggle from the corner of the room prompted the blue-haired girl to swivel her gaze into that direction, onto Cathy, who was sharing the armchair and a blanket with Jered. "Why is everyone in

my room? And you," she turned to Jadeite, blushing "why were you in my bed?"

The brown-haired man leaning against his blonde girlfriend was the first to reply. "Well, when Cathy went looking for you and failed to return, I went to look for her, and here I am."

"I- " Jadeite began, frowning at the slightly accusing tone that had swung in Mercury's voice.

"That's not really his fault," the long-haired swordswoman interrupted, "even asleep, you were very insistent on him not leaving your side." Seeing Ami's incredulous expression, she continued "after he cast that sleep spell on you, you yanked him back into your bed any time he got more than a few steps away."

"I wouldn't!" Ami protested, cheeks burning. *I might think about it occasionally, but...*

"Oh yes, you did. It was quite amusing to watch, actually," Jered piped up, with a wide grin on his face, "any time poor Jadeite thought he had escaped - yoink, back to where he had started! Sleep-keeping, rather than sleepwalking."

"But don't worry, nothing untoward happened, I stayed around to make sure of that," Cathy reassured the girl before she burst a blood vessel. A colour like that couldn't be healthy.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry about this," Ami apologised, her face beet-red. "Are you all right, Jadeite? I- I don't know what came over me!"

"Should I make an educated guess?" Jered asked mockingly, which earned the weasel-featured man an elbow in the ribs, delivered free of charge by his girlfriend. Little wrinkles around the corner of her blue eyes belied the stern expression on her face.

With a strangled whimper, Ami pulled the blanket over her head. She heard her armchair creak as its occupants got up.

"Well, now that you are up and awake, we'll allow you some privacy," Cathy addressed the tent-like mound of embarrassment. Ami heard three sets of retreating footsteps, after which her

bedroom door creaked open as the trio left.

"You are walking rather stiffly, 'general'," Cathy remarked with amusement, watching Jadeite stretch and work out the cricks in his muscles. The female blonde thought she heard a soft grinding noise when he raised his right elbow over his head.

"You try spending half the night forced into an uncomfortable position you can't move from," the dark general grumbled.

"I certainly wouldn't have expected her to be so clingy," the swordswoman nodded in thought.

"Sore?" Jered, the last person to leave the room, commented and waggled his eyebrowns. "Why don't you ask Mercury for a massage? I'm sure she'd be all too happy to- Ouch! Watch it, Cathy, that spot is still tender from earlier!" He pushed the door shut behind himself. The receding wood revealed a group of orcs further down the corridor, who were watching the trio leaving the Keeper's bedchamber with great interest, and were nudging each other. The purplish-skinned humanoids didn't even have the courtesy to pretend that they hadn't been listening in to the conversation. One of them had the gall to wink at Jered over his potato-shaped nose, before making a rude gesture with his elbow and fist that left the wavy-haired man with no illusions about how the creatures had interpreted their observations. Somehow, this was much more amusing when onlookers jumped to conclusions about Mercury alone.

A while later, after a late breakfast, Ami still looked ready to spontaneously combust from embarrassment whenever her gaze fell on Jadeite. However, none of the others assembled around the table were currently in the mood to properly tease her about that, and the dark general himself had yet to address the topic of what had happened. The young Keeper could do without additional distractions now that the Reaper duel loomed only a few hours in the future, and she hadn't sorted out all of her own thoughts yet, anyway.

"All right, to get to the point immediately, the priesthood of Azzathra has announced the site of the duel a while ago and is earning itself a golden nose by selling seats for the event." Four round bone chips embellished with an ochre painting of a seven-horned demon clattered on the table. "Tokens like these will allow one person each to enter."

"Oh my, you bought them?" Snyder asked grumpily. The usually good-natured acolyte didn't care to hide just how annoyed he was that Ami had chosen to venerate a dark god without at least consulting him first. "They are already profiteering from Mercury's misery, they don't need her money too!"

"Actually, these must have dropped to the floor when a foul-smelling and rather unsympathetic troll jostled me in the crowd. Good for me, bad for him," Jered reported with a straight face, polishing one of the tokens on the sleeve of his green shirt.

"All right! We'll be able to lend you moral support from the sidelines, at least!" Cathy shouted enthusiastically, slamming her palm on top of the wooden table to underline her statement.

Gazing down at the tea that sloshed in her cup, Ami replied quietly. "It could be dangerous. It might be better if you stayed somewhere safe instead, rather than going to the Underworld."

"Don't worry, I will be able to evacuate everyone, should it become necessary," Jadeite stated with calm confidence.

"Besides, we aren't going to let you go through that alone. Some support is the least we can do, and that's final," Cathy declared, daring Mercury to contradict her.

"Very well," the blue-haired girl gave in, not in the mood for conflict at the moment. She focused on Jered, who was fingering his bandoleer full of daggers absently. "How much room to manoeuvre will I have?"

Wavy brown hair whipped left and right as the man shook his head in the negative. "Sorry, I couldn't get a look at the place, and neither did the scrying balls. The area is consecrated to Azzathra. I'd

tentatively advise against attempting to escape, magically or otherwise. He can most likely stop any such effort and might consider it a forfeit."

The tightening of Ami's neck muscles betrayed that she was suppressing a shudder, but she nodded. "All right. Now, there are a few things that need to be properly arranged before the battle." Her voice became quieter, forcing her four listeners around the table to lean in closer to understand her. She caught each one's eyes in turn as she spoke, "There's no denying that I might not survive the coming battle - no, don't interrupt," she raised her palm in Cathy's direction, who had opened her mouth to protest. "As much as I wish it didn't, the possibility exists, and not planning for it would be irresponsible." She took a deep breath. "First, the dungeon hearts. I don't want anyone to stumble over one of my inactive ones and damn themselves. This will not be a problem for the crystal heart, as I designed them so they will automatically crumble the moment I die. That leaves the organic dungeon hearts. I have already destroyed the inert one that was hidden beneath Leopold's barony."

She ignored the surprised gasps around the table, but Jered spoke up. "I don't know what to think about that. You destroyed a very valuable resource that you could have potentially moved and used elsewhere. It seems short-sighted."

Ami shook her head. "No, that's not true. After yesterday's events, I have to consider organic hearts a massive liability. I can't leave them guarded by my soldiers, because of the dark god's plague. I can't leave them guarded by traps only, because whatever Azzathra did to kill all my imps turned off the heart's mana respiration for a while, which would also knock out the traps. As the golems are based on imps, they would also be killed if I left *them* as guards. Thus, I can't leave any organic dungeon heart active, because anyone backed by Azzathra could destroy it and banish me back into the darkness," she added quietly and grabbed her shoulders, pressing her arms against her chest.

"What about right now?" Snyder asked, pointing in the general direction from which the dungeon heart's heartbeats echoed.

"If Azzathra is willing to move against me already, I'm doomed

anyway," Ami shrugged with false nonchalance. "I also still need it to power my armour. I plan to disband this dungeon and shut it off once I have survived the duel. For now, I have rigged the dungeon so the heart will be destroyed by falling debris the moment I die and it becomes inactive. That way, nobody else will be caught up in this, at least."

"Hmm, I see. That means that regardless of the duel's outcome, we will not return here?" the red-and-white dressed acolyte asked.

"Yes. Each of you will find a bag of gold in your rooms when you return there - enough to start a new life somewhere where nobody will be looking for you. I hope Jadeite will find it in his heart to transport you, or help you recover the treasures on the iceberg." She looked the curly-haired blond straight in the eyes, and he nodded nearly imperceptibly.

"Don't talk like that! You won't die! I didn't train you to lose. You will pull through, I just know it!" Cathy said quickly, noticing the unshed tears glittering in the corners of Ami's large and sorrowful eyes.

"I intend to," the younger girl smiled at the blonde, "but knowing that everything is arranged for the worst case puts my mind at peace. There is one last thing to do, which I am very happy about," she said, standing up from her seat. "Without my golems, I no longer have a reason to keep these poor fairies imprisoned."

The group of seven insect-winged girls lounged and slouched around the table of their comfortable prison cell. Taken together, the hair colours of the swimsuit-wearing fairies showed all colours of the rainbow.

"Pass," the red-haired fairy muttered with a bored expression, slamming two worn-looking playing cards on the table in front of herself. Her sisters Rosette and Tilia shifted in their seats, eyeing the grand prize of the current game with barely-concealed greed. It was a bottle of bad wine that contained just enough of the burgundy-coloured liquid to refill one of the empty glasses waiting in front of each of the girls.

"Who would have thought that being a Keeper's prisoner would be so mind-numbingly boring?" Camille whined, scratching the top of her head with the edge of the cards she was holding in her hand, and incidentally showing them off to the others without realising this. "It's nearly enough to make one wish Cerasse's pet came back."

"It'sh not m-my pet," the violet-haired fae slurred. As the thinker of the group, she had already won the prize disproportionately often and it showed in the slight blush on her cheeks and the unfocused expression in her eyes.

A new, male voice from beyond the curtain that blocked the entrance to their abode broke up the routine. "Bored? Then I have good news for you."

"Huh? Who are you?" Anise challenged, rising to her feet in a single fluid motion. Without further delay, she tugged the curtain aside hard enough to nearly rip it from its holding. With her hand still on the violet cloth, she looked into the face of a curly-haired blond man waiting outside of the barred hallway. With his prim grey uniform, he looked quite striking, but the hand stretched out toward her cell, combined with the soft, blue-white glow of his eyes was quite worrisome, as was the smug grin playing around his lips. Black streamers of fog shot out from Jadeite's extended digits, and the redhead leapt back, a moment to late "Watch ou-" she managed to cry out before she collapsed into an unconscious heap on the floor, right in the doorway. Chair legs scraped over the ground as fairies scrambled to take cover while the darkness spilled in.

"Oh, he'sh ish cute," Cerasse hiccuped, catching a glimpse of the figure outside through the drawn-aside curtain, before the dark fog reached her and cut off further thought. "Sho tired..." Her head drooped, bumping into the wood of the table with an audible thud as the girl slumped in her chair.

Two more of the fairies dropped where they sat, with too little warning to do something about what was happening. Only the three who had sat furthest away from the entrance managed to get up. A chair clattered to the floor, carelessly pushed over in their haste to retreat from the evil fumes. Orange fairy tripped over the unexpected obstacle, and her flailing hands hit her sister on the back, right

between her wings. "Ow! Watch where you are going!"

The two imbalanced fairies toppled, one with her arms around the waist of the other as she grasped for something to hold onto. Like dominoes, the two falling girls crashed into the third one, who might have otherwise stayed ahead of the billowing edge of the narcotic mist. The trio crashed to the ground in a tangled pile of flailing limbs and pained grunts.

"So tired... NO! I refuse to... to.. submit..." Pinching herself and biting her tongue, indigo-haired Dandel fought against the spell threatening to send her into unconsciousness. She could feel the bodies of her sisters draped over her go limp, shielding her from the worst of the magic that was trying to overwhelm her mind. *"Must... resist..."* She heard approaching footsteps, muffled by the carpet, and gradually, the compulsion to close her eyes and go to sleep faded away. What was that strange man - he was the one the Keeper was interested in, if she remembered right - intending to do to them? Faking unconsciousness, she watched through eyes that were barely-open slits as the blonde approached Anise, the closest of the fallen fairies. Dandel considered her options. If she played possum, maybe she could surprise him. The weight of her sisters pinning down her legs added a further complication she didn't need, but - he was squatting down next to the redhead now and put a gloved hand on her upper arm. The bastard had better not - "Damn it!" Before she could do anything, both he and her sister had disappeared in a teleport flash. What should she do? Confront him immediately when he returned - if he returned?

Even as she thought, the dark-dressed man shimmered back into existence next to Melissa and tapped the blue-haired girl on the shoulder, making them both disappear. Dandel nodded to herself. Right. If he was taking all of them away, she'd wait until he got to her. She'd be closer for ambush, and he might transport her to an area where her magic wasn't suppressed. Sure, there was a risk, but even if she beat him here, she would still be stuck in this cell with no way to go rescue her sisters. Yes, waiting was the better option. With her eyes closed, the fairy listened to the faint inrushing of air whenever the wizard removed one of the other girls from the room. She felt a weight disappear from her legs, then another, and

suddenly, it was her turn. A shadow bent over her, and she could feel a warm touch on the back of her neck. From one moment to another, she suddenly felt grass underneath her hands, rather than rough carpet. Wait, grass? The indigo-haired fae was so surprised that she missed her opportunity to attack the blond guy while he was still bent over her. A moment later, he disappeared, and she opened her eyes and looked around. Bright! With a wince, she closed them again and listened to the sounds. Was that birdsong? She could also hear the gurgling of a brook nearby. Cautiously, she shielded her face from the sunlight and looked around. There were her sisters, lying in the high grass of a meadow and dripping golden glitter that the wind picked up. Dandel could smell the scent of summer flowers in the air, and sat up. Bemused, she wondered at their good fortune. Why would the dark-clad magic user save them, unless he was really a hero, like her boy-hungry sisters had speculated? He *was* quite handsome, and his eyes had glowed whitish, not red...

Unexpectedly, the man reappeared right in front of her, causing the indigo-haired woman to squawk in surprise and lean back so that she could better look up at him. Against the bright blue of the sky, he seemed a monolithic black silhouette. He cocked his head and raised an eyebrow as he saw her up and about.

"Hmm? Awake already?" Jadeite asked in a tone of surprise. A jingling bag dropped to the ground next to his boots. The string tying it shut came undone, and a gleaming gold coin spilled onto the grassy soil.

"Who are you? What's going on?" the fairy asked, gaping. Behind her back, lightning began to gather in her hidden fist. Better safe than sorry.

"I am Jadeite, general of the Dark Kingdom," the curly-haired blond introduced himself. "Sailor Mercury has decided that keeping you imprisoned is no longer useful to her. Enjoy your freedom."

"So she was going to get rid of us?" the indigo haired girl gasped, feeling a chill run down her spine. "What about that?" she asked, tapping the bag of gold with her toes.

"An indemnity for the time you were imprisoned, if you will," Jadeite explained.

"Wait! That Keeper might be mind-controlling you!" Dandel blurted out when the dark general turned his back on her as if to leave, and grabbed onto his shin. "We can help you!"

Jadeite looked down at her over his shoulder, presenting his face in profile. What was it with him and clingy girls today? "I sincerely doubt that," he smirked as he pulled his leg free. "Now scram, I have other things to do." His form dissolved into lines that shot upward before fading from sight, leaving behind a wide-eyed fairy with a confused and faraway look in her eyes. She let out a dreamy sigh before rushing over to her sisters, who were still lying sprawled out in the grass.

Tense silence reigned in the classroom, only interrupted by the footsteps of the teacher walking through the rows of desks, keeping a stern eye on the girls in grey school uniforms with red bows and dark blue shirts, who were sweating over a test. Rei chewed at the end of her pencil, glaring at the paper in front of her as if the questions had offended her personally. With all of her extracurricular activities, the black-haired girl had not been motivated enough to study as much as she should have. With a start, she straightened, bumping into her desk, which pushed it forward and caused a high-pitched scraping sound.

"Is something wrong, Hino?" the teacher asked, turning her inquisitive gaze on the blinking shrine maiden, who rapidly shook her head. "Then please refrain from causing a disturbance in the future," the old woman snapped acidly and resumed her rounds. Rei hung her head. *That feeling just now, that was Ami!* And here she was, with no piece of paper in front of her to write down her burning questions, aside from the multiple-choice test waiting in front of her. And she would have to hand that in later. The fiery-tempered girl balled her left hand into a fist in frustration while she quickly jotted down dots and lines into the margin of the sheet of paper. They corresponded to the lengths of time during which she could feel her friend's presence. The message was short, obviously. Ami wouldn't

disturb her more than absolutely necessary during an exam if she could help it. Suppressing a sigh at her friend's excessive studiousness, Rei turned her attention back to the test. Despite her unsatisfied curiosity, she felt relief at the contact. At least, Ami was still enough in control of herself to let her allies know what was going on.

The anti-reaper measure that Jered had been working on turned out to be two walnut-sized spheres with thin shells. "Both harmless on their own" the wavy-haired man had explained with an unpleasant grin. "Get them into the Reaper's stomach and crack them during the fight. The liquids will mix, and BOOM," he gestured with his hands upward, "massive internal damage, and you'll be able to win easily. The shells will also slowly dissolve from his stomach acid, but how long that will take is pretty unpredictable. Anything from one to three hours."

It was blatant, unashamed cheating, of course. There was also a great chance of success, and any moral objections Ami might have had were tag-teamed by the fact that she would be using it on a loathsome, evil, completely irredeemable mass murderer, and by the knowledge of what might happen to her if she failed. The objections never stood a chance. Transporting the spheres into the Reaper's stomach with her Keeper powers was a trivial, if gross, exercise while he was still her prisoner. Now, the blue-haired girl was floating above the beating membrane of her dungeon heart, bathing in the stream of green mana pouring out of it. She held the helmet of her magical armour in her trembling hands, and looked at the visor that so resembled the hollow eye-sockets of a skull. With a sharp intake of breath, she pulled it over her head and watched the surrounding hall through its vertical slits. Under her left gauntlet, Azzathra's magic pulsed as the outer circle of the orange design, now little more than a single line, continued to disappear. Drenched in cold sweat, Ami summoned her sword and closed her eyes, waiting.

Irresistible power whisked Ami away, and for an instant, the world seemed to whirl around Ami's eyes. The momentary disorientation

passed, and she could feel solid ground under her feet again. She gulped. The moment she had been dreading for so long had finally arrived. From all around, a many-voiced roar assaulted her ears, and she recognised the noise as the sounds of rowdy fans lining the ranks of a stadium. She was in a massive stone colosseum, similar to the ruined one in Rome, and the benches ringing the arena itself were filled with excitedly-shouting burly creatures. The bile demons had a section to themselves, as nobody but the food vendors would voluntarily approach them, but the other seats were taken up by a more heterogeneous mix of occupants.

Ami let her gaze wander over the ranks, searching for her friends amidst the excited green faces of wide-jawed trolls and the white-greyish tufts of shaggy hair that crowned the heads of the orcs. Oh, there they were, sitting together in the third row from the bottom. Rather than being jostled for being some of the smallest in the brutish crowd, they were being given a wide berth. Ami squinted, noticing the hunched-over figures sprawled out and draped over the seats directly in front and behind her four companions. Jadeite's handiwork, no doubt.

It was hot here, Ami found, as if the place was lit directly by sunlight. She raised her head and looked up, only to stare in wonder at the stream of lava crawling along the ceiling, openly defying gravity and drenching the entire area in its orange light like an ancient, angry sun. If Ami had needed more proof that this place was permeated with Azzathra's power, she would have had it now. Shuddering, she swept her gaze across the battlefield proper. She was standing on a round basalt platform, about ten metres in diameter, that rose from the bottom of the combat pit like a vast, black pillar. That brought it to the same level as the special box interrupting the north end of the seating arrangement. The elaborate carvings and pillars along its walls made it immediately clear that whoever occupied it was more important than the common rabble on the surrounding seats. Ami recognised the thirteen black-robed, hooded figures with crimson cords around their waists as priests of Azzathra. They stood in a semi-circle around a wide bronze brazier that could have held all of them. Incense within roasted on glowing coals, and its aromatic fumes flowed around a pedestal carved from smoke-blackened bones. The elevated podium served as the centrepiece of the small

temple, and Ami watched in fascination as a tall, unfamiliar creature walked out of the shadows and took position behind it, while the priests bowed to it. The man - for he was bare-chested - had a figure like a Greek god, and his skin tone was hard to distinguish in this light. It was either dark blue or greyish, Ami decided after a moment of observation. The bald head looked human, except for two ridges that started above his eyebrows and curved around to his temples, where they swung upward and turned into short horns. More impressive were the massive black wings folded up on his back. He spread them wide as he addressed the crowd, and a deep, painful voice that felt like fingernails scratching over a blackboard rumbled through the arena. "SILENCE! The games are about to begin!"

That caused the hubbub to die down as the spectators took note of the combatant who had arrived in the centre of the arena, covered from head to toe in sinister plate armour crafted to resemble a skeleton, holding a two-hander as tall as herself, and whose visor blazed with red light.

"Here, we have our first warrior, the treacherous Keeper Mercury," the dark angel announced, making the stone vibrate with the volume of his voice. A murmur went through the crowd, and Ami found herself the object of intense scrutiny, much to the timid girl's discomfort. Most of the comments she could make out were either awestruck cries of "A Keeper," or disparaging snorts about her lack of size.

A flicker of orange light drew the heavily-armoured girl's attention back onto the platform. Not far away, a pillar of fire shot from the black stone ground, revealing a darker figure within.

"And here is her opponent, a horned reaper who failed in his task," the master of ceremonies bellowed, raising his hands grandiosely. Like everyone else, he blinked when the demon's knees buckled and his whole, massive bulk crashed to the ground like a felled tree. His scythe clattered down next to him. Laughter, muffled at first, then louder, echoed through the compound, especially when the more sharp-sighted among the crowd picked up on the red monster's relative chubbiness.

"A little pre-battle roughing-up, Keeper? A cheating Keeper. How

unexpected," the winged being commented. A few seconds later, he let out a disappointed sigh when the vast majority of his audience completely failed to get the sarcasm. Trolls and orcs looked at each other, shrugging their shoulders.

"Oh whatever. By Azzathra the Mighty Tyrant's power, be restored!"

Ami could feel a prickling sensation, and a cramp in her neck went away. For the Reaper, the infusion of divine energy had much more visible effects. Eyes like blazing yellow slits in the demon's crimson face opened and focused on her with murderous intent. The horned monster let out a hot, sulphur smelling-snort and pulled himself to his feet, his intense gaze never once wavering from Ami's metal-clad form. "You. Will. Die," he growled, making the threat sound like a promise. Ami took an involuntary step back from the figure that was nearly twice as tall as she was, and nearly as wide as he was tall. How was she supposed to beat that with her hastily-acquired skills?

All around the arena, rapid drumbeat picked up, as if the drummers were trying to whip everyone's adrenaline glands into a frenzy. Ami hated them for it. She was tense enough already!

"Both of these warriors are here today to prove that they are strong enough to deserve a second chance," the dark angel's grating voice resonated through the building once more. "The rules are simple: whoever dies loses. Falling off the platform and into our Great Lord Azzathra's domain counts as losing." Oh no. Ami peered at the edge of the round pillar of stone. Where once the ground had been, waiting comfortingly only around ten metres below, gaped now a bottomless black pit. Dropping in would make her worst nightmares come true. "And without further ado, BEGIN!"

Ami's heart skipped a beat at the announcement, then her eyes narrowed behind her visor as she saw the Reaper starting to move. She would finish this as quickly and unfairly as she possibly could. The audience was treated to the sight of a sudden whirl of snow obscuring their view of the smaller combatant. Ami reappeared in a flash of blue behind the charging Reaper, the metal of her boots screaming on the stone as she pirouetted, swinging her sword in a cutting arc that would cut the monster in half at the waist. However,

he was already further away than she had expected, and impossibly fast, the hulking red demon bent bent down. The blade whistled past a finger's breadth above his bent spine. Wide-eyed at the failure of her surprise attack, Ami nearly missed the massive incoming blur that was the monster's left hoof. With the last bit of speed that she could eke out of her powered armour, she managed to remove her head from the attack's path, rather than having it removed from her shoulders. The hoof still scraped along the left side of her helmet, rattling her skull and making the metal screech as sparks flew. The girl, half-deafened on that ear, staggered backward. The Reaper, still bent over with his hands on the ground and one leg outstretched, propelled himself into a textbook perfect cartwheel with the other leg and landed on his feet, now facing his opponent again. His lips were twisted into an ugly, fang-baring snarl as he took the measure of his enemy. Around them, the public, stunned by the intensity of the first exchange, broke into wild cheers.

The Reaper wasn't one to wait for his opponent to make the next move, and thundered toward Mercury, blade lifted high as the brittle basalt under his hooves cracked from the force of his steps. *He's incredibly fast with these mirrored sailor senshi enchantments,* Ami realised, disappearing into a swirl of snow a split-second before the demon's scythe parted the air where she had just been standing. Expecting another sneak attack, the Reaper brought his long-handled weapon close to his body and let it flash around himself like a staff, but the gleaming armour of his opponent appeared a distance away, close to the edge of the platform.

"Shabon Spray!" The scowling, skull-like leer of Ami's helmet, twisted upward by the dent in the metal, disappeared behind a solid wall of fog. Her vision went blank too as the mirrored magic copied her spell into an unfriendly version. Loud boos and whistles reached her, muffled by the mist, as the audience protested against being unable to see the action. What the senshi really used the distraction for was grabbing a set of five enchanted daggers from her belt and relocating to the other side of the platform with a quiet teleport.

"And Keeper Mercury shows incredibly bad taste in obstructing our view. Let's correct this, shall we?" the master of ceremonies boomed, and suddenly the fog was gone, revealing the Reaper in a

forward-leaning stance, horned head held low between his massive pauldrons as he craned his neck and searched for his opponent. Almost immediately, he spotted her new location and barrelled down on it like a freight train.

Ami flicked the handful of seeking daggers into his direction, watching the triangular blades glow with magic as they fanned out and dived down onto their respective targets like blood-seeking mosquitos. The red-skinned demon decelerated upon hearing their angry buzz, his hooves screeching across the ground as his heavy mass continued moving him forward. The five glowing lines in the air streaking toward him stopped abruptly when his weapon became a blur in his hands, spinning fast enough to appear like a translucent disk that the daggers impacted with.

Perfect, Ami thought. In a flash of blue and snowflakes, she was at his side and too close to be in effective striking distance, her long, near triangular blade already hissing through the air and towards the beast's chest. The Reaper reacted by lowering his shoulder, catching the devastating blow on his pauldron at the last moment. Rather than sinking into the demon's flesh, the sword bounced off of the metal with a loud bang, throwing sparks - and not the regular kind. Her nose picked up a trace of ozone, and the Reaper let out a shocked bellow as the electricity contained within secondary batteries in her armour discharged itself through her sword, into the pauldron, and from there into the monster. Ami drew back her weapon and hacked at the neck of her smoking foe, whose muscles were twitching and spasming from the abuse. Somehow, her overly large foe managed to stagger back, and only the tip of the blade slashed a deep, gushing furrow just below his collarbone. The blood that oozed out and splattered against Ami's armour was darker than the red of the monster's skin.

"And Keeper Mercury draws first blood, despite her despicable tactics!" the dark angel commented, his voice apathetic. A few of the troll in the audience hooted, and so did Cathy. "You go, Mercury!"

"Darn it! DIE!" Frustrated at her lack of progress, Ami brought her blade down again in a vicious arc, letting out an inarticulate scream. She was still too close for the Reaper to use his scythe effectively, and she wasn't about to give up that advantage! Clang! The sound

of metal on metal rang out like a gunshot, and sparks flew as the weapons met each other with incredible force. The Reaper was using his scythe like a staff, interposing it between himself like and back-pedalling rapidly, trying to get some space between himself and his opponent, but Ami wouldn't let him. The audience watched incredulously as both opponents moved slowly across the platform while the armoured Keeper, her eyes blazing red, rained down blows on her much larger and heavier opponent at a breakneck speed, letting out a short cry with each strike. After the initial surprise, they started shouting in approval at the amazing show and climbing on the benches to see better. The excited roar got louder until it nearly drowned out the clashing of metal on metal.

The Reaper's eyebrows were attempting to climb onto his forehead as his opponent chased him over the battlefield, forcing him to give ground and leaving him no opportunity to mount an offence of his own. How had she gotten stronger and faster than him? Each impact was hard enough to rattle his bones, send sparks flying, and physically lift the girl a hand's width off the ground, but she was somehow compensating for that. Magic again, without a doubt. With a grimace, he moved his grip on the haft of his weapon. The little bitch was aiming for his fingers!

Ami did not hear the hollering of the crowd and did not see the confusion crawling into the Reaper's features. There was no time for fear, no time for doubt, only time for aiming, striking, obliterating her enemy. Again and again she struck, falling into a rhythm that her body, rattled around by the magical armour, could barely keep up with.

"She's winning!" Snyder shouted happily, watching the spectacle on the platform as it approached their location. But suddenly, a gasp went through the onlookers. Before Ami had realised what was going on, the horned demon had given up on his failing tactic and stepped forward, bowling into her, rather than giving more ground. His greater bulk meant that she was the one to be toppled by the impact, and to add insult to injury, he kicked her between the legs while she was falling and sent her flying like a football. While the armour had softened the blow, it had still dazed Ami. Gritting her teeth and holding on to her weapon was all she could do as she

tumbled through the air. As the world spun around the grille of her visor, she saw the monster make a run for her, his scythe already lifted for an overhead blow and gleaming like molten metal in the light of the lava above. *Maybe I could...* "Shabon Spray Freezing!"

The blast of blue bubbles hit the charging red beast, who was unable to dodge at this distance, head-on. As soon as the magic encased him in a block of ice, Ami felt herself become very cold and unable to move, too. However, she had trained for this. A quick teleport released her from her own prison and brought her next to the frozen Reaper. Now! With a loud shattering noise, a hailstorm of fast-moving ice shards pelted her all over, striking like a hurricane of punches as the Reaper exploded out of his confinement. Blown back and sprawled out on the ground, Ami watched round-eyed as the monster flexed his muscles and stepped out from the remains of the cracked ice, some of which had buried his feet up to his armoured shins. *How? The sailor senshi upgrade can't have- oh no! All that struggling against the restraints must have made him stronger! Ack! No time to think!* A shadow fell over Ami, and the Reaper's weapon scythed toward her prone form in a deadly arc. With a desperate thrust of her arms, she catapulted herself backward and rolled out of the path of the blow that tore a deep furrow into the raven-coloured stone where she had just been. The demon grunted in irritation.

That had been too close. Ami needed a breather and decided to go with her one tactic that probably wouldn't fly, figuratively speaking. She was, in fact, hovering in the air above the battlefield, too high for the Reaper to reach, even with a several storey jump. Like everyone else, he was still looking around to see where she had reappeared. Under her breath, she muttered the incantation for the lightning spell, and the brilliant, forking bolt shot down from her fingers and toward her opponent below, making a beeline for the scythe that protruded into the air like a lightning rod. The surprised demon jerked and twitched from the current, and smoke rose from his form. Unfortunately, he was still moving, and growled up at her.

Ami herself lit up like a light bulb as the copied attack spell struck her, but the nonmagical protection woven into the layers of her plate mail protected her. Now all eyes in the stadium were locked on her.

The boos and whistles started. Let them. Ami threw another lightning bolt at the robust demon, which he dodged, impossibly. Where did these reflexes come from, the armoured girl wondered while the small explosion caused by her miss sent steam and splinters through the air. The booing from the audience was becoming louder now, and many of the creatures were shaking their fists and making rude gestures in her direction. Well, she wasn't here to please them. She could keep this up all day, if necessary. Drifting to the left to dodge the Reaper's return fire, a ball of flame that whooshed past her without getting close, she sent more destructive power after him. On the ground, the red demon zig-zagged, avoiding her bombardment for the most part even as she cratered the surface of the arena with her bolts.

"Oh dear, Keeper Mercury is resorting to foul and underhanded tactics again. While there's nothing wrong with that, she is using the tactics of a *weakling*. Let's bring her back down to earth, shall we?" The black-winged master of ceremonies mocked and waved his hands in a ritual pattern.

That doesn't sound good, Ami thought, which an unexpected blow to her head confirmed. A flat, amber-coloured forcefield had slammed into her from above like a giant flyswatter. With her back pressed against it by the acceleration, she was propelled toward the ground. Rather than let herself be hurled into the floor, she teleported to ground level, letting the strength of her armour cushion the impact. It was still enough to make cracks appear in the rock and make her feel as if she had just jumped down from a roof - in civilian form. The artificial ceiling stopped approaching about ten metres above, but, attracted by the azure teleport flash, the Reaper was already sprinting toward his soon-to-be-victim, a maniac grin on his face. Ami brought up her hands, unleashed another twisting arc of electricity in his direction, and teleported away, not waiting for the results. Now on the opposite side of the platform, she saw that the bulky creature had once again managed to evade. While turning, he had already released another of his fireballs. It struck Ami head on, engulfing her armoured form in a wreath of flame that momentarily hid her slender frame from view. The demon smirked viciously, until a stream of blue-white lightning from within the cloud of fire wiped the grin off his face. Sizzling, he charged toward Ami's position with

an outraged bellow, only for her to teleport back to the other side and throw more bolts of arcing electricity at him.

Audible clearly above the booing and disappointed grumbling of the viewers, the dark angel, surrounded by his coterie of priests, spoke up. "And once again, Mercury shows off her cowardice by using magic instead of brawn. I think it is time to-"

"SHUT UP! I will deal with this myself!" the Reaper growled with barely-restrained outrage, baring his fangs at the dark angel, who cocked his head and shrugged his shoulders. The red demon turned back to face Ami, and received an unsportsmanlike blast of lightning to his face for his trouble. Despite the pain and his facial muscles moving in uncontrolled spasms, he let out roaring laughter, which made him look like a demented maniac. "I know how to get you now, you worm!" The largest fireball yet shot from his scythe and bore down on his opponent, howling as it consumed the air in its path. Ami, unimpressed and still immune to fire, didn't budge and used the time to take proper aim - until the reaper's spinning scythe, following unseen behind the ball of flame obstructing her sight, bounced off of her helmet with a metallic ring. Staggering, Ami teleported away, expecting the Reaper to be hot on his weapon's heels. To her surprise, he hadn't moved from his spot, but was raising his arms above his head and leaning back, roaring at the sky with ear-splitting volume. A cloud of flame spun around his legs, closing in on them. A similar one had appeared under her own feet. What was he - OH NO! Mirrored magic! Ami's heart sank to the pit of her stomach when she realised what was going on, moments before her vital armour flickered and disappeared. Streamers of fire crept along her limbs, snaking upwards like tendrils of liquid metal, and forming an appropriately-sized copy of the Reaper's equipment on her body. Which consisted of greaves for her shins, a tiny loincloth, pauldrons for the shoulders connected by a chain across her collarbone, and, of course, a scythe.

Fortunately, the demon didn't give her enough time to properly reflect on her terror and mortification, or to let the realisation that she was as good as naked on a stage in front of thousands of eyes sink in, because he immediately leapt toward her, nearly catching her during her state of momentary shock. His scythe only cut a few

unlucky snowflakes in twain, but he didn't seem to mind. With a happy grin, he gave chase, not giving his prey a moment to catch her breath and come up with a new plan.

The jeers and hollers of the crowd rose to new heights as the onlookers realised what had happened. Four of the observers were not in a festive mood, though.

"Oh, poor Mercury," Snyder sighed, slowly shaking his head from the left to the right as he hid his eyes behind his palms.

"Don't look at her! Give her some privacy," Cathy demanded, elbowing her boyfriend, who was staring unabashedly. Jadeite wasn't acting much more dignified, to her chagrin. However, his next words surprised her.

"This isn't good. She is in worse shape than it looked like with the armour on," the curly haired blond commented, prompting the swordswoman to take another look at the scantily-clad teenager fleeing from the horned reaper. Her movements were still coordinated, and the muscles working under her sweaty skin seemed to be moving smoothly enough, but her body was covered over and over in bruises, especially around the arms.

"The armour must have put more strain on her body than she let on," Cathy worried and bit her lips, forgetting about chiding the guys for ogling the blue-haired girl. "Mercury, please come up with a solution like you always do," she begged.

On the platform, Ami knew that she had to regain the initiative. If this turned into a contest of endurance, the Reaper would win, no questions asked. Panting, she weighed the scythe in her hand as she fled. It didn't feel too different from her two-hander, so maybe she could - yes, the way he held his scythe would leave him open from the back and the left when he charged. Narrowing her eyes in determination, Ami flashed out of existence, only to fade back into being next to the rapidly-moving monstrosity. Pumping red legs pivoted when she raised her scythe, and a moment later, the blue-haired girl found herself back-handed and batted away, with the right side of her ribcage feeling as if it was on fire. It got worse when she landed and rolled over the splintery rubble, scraping and scratching

her skin in the process. The red of blood joined the black and blue marks on her pale skin. *No good! I can't match him without the armour!* With a groan that turned into a girlish "Eek," she managed to teleport away just before the large-hooved twin figures blurring in front of her swimming vision could land on her.

The chase continued, and the initial excitement of the fickle crowd turned into displeasure. In the special box, the master of ceremonies spoke up once again. "This is pathetic. It is already clear who has won, and I will now shut down all magic use in the arena. Go get her," he nodded to the horned reaper, who grinned as a many-pointed seal flared up as purplish veins in the rock of the arena.

Ami's legs nearly buckled when she heard the announcement, accompanied by the familiar drain of an anti-magic ward divesting her of her mana. Tears of fear and despair started gathering in the corners of her eyes, which blazed like red gates to hell while under the effect of the drain. *I can't die! I can't go to Azzathra! I can't can't can't!* Slowly, she faced the large, barrel-chested demon, who was sauntering in her direction, unhurried now that he knew she couldn't escape. Stone splinters crunched under his hooves as he readied his scythe, while Ami fell into a combat stance, shivering all the while. She couldn't give up!

"Done running away?" the Reaper teased with not a trace of humour, towering over the defiant girl. With a snort, he swung his weapon, making it blur with the force behind it. Cathy closed her eyes.

A deafening clang resounded through the building, even more audible in the silence caused by everyone holding their breath to see the conclusion of the battle. The demon stared incredulously down at the bar of metal that had stopped the descent of his weapon. It was the handle of Mercury's scythe, held up horizontally by the trembling girl. It was slightly bent in the area between the Keeper's hands, where his own weapon was applying pressure on it. Despite the enormous force he was exerting, the weapon held by the trembling girl, who looked as if she could barely remain on her feet under her own power, wasn't budging even a bit. The Reaper's frown deepened, but suddenly, his grin returned. "Oh, I see what you are doing," he growled, "using the Keeper power of moving your

possessions in order to keep your weapon locked in place. Clever." The girl's eyes widened, confirming his guess. His grin now threatened to split his face in two. "However," he continued, and let go of his own scythe, grabbing Ami's with his freed hands, "This is *my* weapon now!"

With abject terror, the battered and bruised girl felt her influence over the scythe fade when the monster contested her possession of it. He yanked at the metal, making her stumble toward him as she tried desperately to keep control of it - and his rising knee caught her in the stomach, hard enough to throw her into the air. Her vision was fading from the pain, and she could barely breathe. As if in slow motion, she felt herself fall back down to the ground, toward the smug demon whose face grew larger and larger as she fell head-first toward him. Spinning from her momentum, she rotated and lost sight of the creature, but knew she was falling past his shoulders now. She could taste blood-flavoured vomit on her tongue. No! It couldn't end like this! Suddenly, her descent stopped as a rough hand closed around her left ankle. The reaper turned the girl dangling head-first from his raised right arm around by rotating her ankle. There was a loud snapping sound, and Ami reared up in pain, letting out air she didn't know she still had in her lungs with her cry of pain. Through the veil of tears covering her eyes, she could see the upside-down face of the monster, his hateful eyes burning like malicious yellow moons.

"And now," the Reaper spoke, corners of his mouth turning up in satisfaction at the sight of the broken, blood-covered, half-naked body of his hated enemy dangling in his grip,

I can't die like this! Not here! I must survive! There must be something I can do!

"you,"

What can I do? I have no weapon, no powers, no magic, nothing! What am I supposed to do, beat him up with my bare hands?

Sudden hope flared up behind Ami's eyes as she remembered something she still *could* do.

"DI- URK!"

Her body was her territory. It belonged to her. Being banished into the darkness had taught her that she could move parts of herself with her Keeper power. She still had two functional hands that she could use as a weapon. Of course, she'd be lucky if something more than a pulp of flesh and bone splinters remained, but being crippled was immeasurably better than being tormented forever.

Jaws dropped all around the arena when the harmless-looking slip of a girl dangling head-over in front of the towering reaper launched a single, lightning fast jab with her left fist into the stomach of the demon - reputedly one of the strongest monsters that walked this realm - and the blow *kept going* upon hitting the red-skinned abdomen, sinking into the folding mass of leathery skin and solid muscle up to the wrist. The demon let go, his prey forgotten as his eyes bugged out and he doubled over in pain, pressing his enormous hands on his stomach.

"Cathy! Cathy, look! It isn't over yet!" Jered shook the quietly crying ball that was his girlfriend, prompting her to raise her head and look back at the arena. Snyder, who had been looking at the ground with a grim expression on his face, heard the excitement in the wavy-haired man's voice and looked up too. There was the horned reaper, doubled over, choking in pain and coughing up copious amounts of foamy dark blood and bile. At his feet lay the tiny form of Mercury, looking heart-breakingly weak, but still moving as she crawled toward the discarded weapons on the ground.

"Your concoction seems to have worked as advertised," Jadeite congratulated the green-dressed rogue, "I was getting very, very worried there." *And the Reaper won't be been around long enough afterwards to enjoy his victory,* he thought with sudden possessiveness.

Ami's hands fell on the handle of her scythe, the smaller of the two. Not far away, the Reaper was still coughing up his entrails, but with the state she was in, he might as well have been back in her own world. Running on adrenaline alone, she closed her grip around the weapon. She probably could throw this thing pretty hard if she used her Keeper powers, she mused. So she did.

The applause in the arena was indescribable when the seemingly-defeated girl cowering on the ground picked up one of the fallen scythes, raised it, and hurled it like a throwing axe. As if guided by fate, the long, pointed blade buried itself in the Reaper's chest, and he staggered backwards, roaring like a wounded animal and leaving a trail of hot, dark blood. His shambling movements brought him closer and closer to the edge of the platform until his hoof found no more ground to step on. Losing his balance, the monster keeled over and was devoured by the abyss.

"And... in an utterly surprising turn of events, the winner is Keeper Mercury!" the master of ceremonies announced, sounding as baffled as everyone else. "If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes..."

With a sensation that felt like the snapping of a matchstick, Ami, who was cradling her useless left hand and hurting everywhere, felt Azzathra's magic on her shatter. This nightmare was finally over.

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Recovering

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Exhausted but flooded with relief, Ami lay on the cratered black basalt, feeling the sharp pebbles underneath her press into the bare skin of her back. In the state she was in, the stones were the least of her concerns. Her abdomen was a single black and blue bruise, lined with streaks of red blood trickling down her heaving chest from her wounded left hand that she was clutching against it. She didn't dare look down at the limb for fear of what she would see. The mess of blood, flesh, and bone splinters that had struck the Reaper like a high-velocity missile wasn't hurting all that much, which made the short-haired girl worry even more. She shifted her weight onto her right elbow as she rolled to the side so that she could see the black-winged master of ceremonies. Her broken left shin, jostled by the movement, sent a twinge of pain through her that made her gasp. Panting, she went through the extra effort required to sit up, never taking her gaze off of the dark-skinned figure, who was as bare-chested as she was. That would have normally been cause for terminal mortification, but Ami was in too much pain to care right now, even with the roaring of the crowd applauding her victory and reminding her of her exposed location.

The feeling of evil, oppressive power gathering in the special box holding the hooded priests and the dark angel was much more cause for alarm. With wide eyes, she watched a darting flame lick up from the huge brazier and consume the remaining incense within. The resulting smoke curled unnaturally in the air. *Azzathra!* Ami shivered as she felt the the hateful presence of the dark god, manifesting somewhere close behind the thin skein of reality. The black-robed priests all threw themselves onto their bellies, while the winged man only lowered his head and closed his eyes, nodding from time to time as if listening. Finally, the dark angel raised his voice. "SILENCE!"

The thunderous voice lashed through the Colosseum like a whip, putting a sudden end to the cheers and shouts as creatures ducked

as if struck. The master of ceremonies smiled smugly as the drums fell silent too, and he threw his wings open theatrically. "As you all know, our Great Lord, Azzathra the Mighty Tyrant, traditionally rewards the winner by bestowing upon him some aspect of the loser's strength." His gaze focused on the small-looking girl lying on the basalt platform not far away.

Ami gulped, tasting coppery blood in her throat as her imagination conjured up visions of being turned into some grotesque, over-muscular parody of herself. Or, even worse, taking on the appearance of the reaper. She didn't want baldness or red skin! Horns or hoofed legs would be a disaster, too! She opened her mouth to protest, but was cut off when the master of ceremonies continued speaking in his booming voice.

"However, Lord Azzathra, in his infinite wisdom, has decided that such a gift would *clearly* be wasted on a Keeper of her ability." As usual, the listening monsters failed to register the sarcasm, but Ami picked up on it immediately, and waited for the other shoe to drop. "As she *seems*," the dark angel glowered at Ami directly for a moment, "able enough physically, she will receive some of the horned reaper's knowledge instead."

That didn't seem too bad, Ami thought, before remembering what had happened with Malleus' memories. She started when something black and rectangular shimmered into existence with a thunderclap. The dark angel snatched the book out of the air and tossed it toward the young Keeper with a careless flick of his wrist. If the implied insult of offering knowledge, rather than power, was too subtle to penetrate the thick skulls of the audience, the more crude one of the heavy tome bouncing off of Ami's forehead was not. "There, take it and go," the imposing figure ordered, crossing his arms.

The blue-haired girl needn't be told twice, and amidst the snickers of the crowd, she put her right hand on the cover of the volume, feeling the coldness of its brass beneath her fingertips. A moment later, her half-naked form melted into shadows that arced upwards before crossing the abyss separating the platform from the surrounding ranks. It descended like black lightning onto a cheering Cathy, who was sitting next to her elated companions.

"Sorry, Cathy. I just don't feel like being in my own body right now," Ami's voice rang out in the swordswoman's mind, who felt her muscles lock up for a moment before the young Keeper relinquished control.

"I can understand that," the warrior replied, sounding a bit taken aback by the situation, before she smiled widely and wiped her tears off of her cheeks *"Congratulations on your victory! I knew you could do it!"*

The others looked at the scar-faced blonde, noting how her eyes flashed red for a moment before returning to their usual dark blue colour.

"Mercury? You all right?" Jered asked, voicing the question on everyone's mind.

Cathy's eyes flashed back to red, and when she spoke, she formed her words with the gentler inflection of Sailor Mercury. "As well as I can be given the circumstances, yes. It helps that I'm not hurting right now, but we should get out of here. Jadeite, could you teleport us out of here, please?"

The dark general, who had been scowling at the mob of monsters jostling each other as they clogged the exist from the arena, shook his head. "We will have to leave the premises first. I can't detect where I am relative to the world while in this building," he commented. In a more encouraging tone, he added "Well fought."

"Indeed, Indeed. I'll be glad to leave too," Snyder added. For once, he was wearing nondescript black robes, rather than the white and red acolyte garb he preferred. Given the group's current location, this had been a wise decision on his part. Nevertheless, he still stood out the most out of any of Ami's team, due to the neatness of his bowl cut and his rigid, uneasy posture. In contrast, Jered had no trouble presenting himself as one of the shady-looking denizens of this place. Jadeite fit right in, cackling as he cleared a path for the group, smashing burly orcs into walls and shoving trolls aside. He wasn't making any friends, and a particularly offended pot-bellied monster came at him with a broken bottle in its lumpish hands, bounced off of the dark general's shields, crashed into the nearby

seats, and slid over them, plummeting to the row below. Cathy herself remained unchallenged for the most part - glowing red eyes were bad news, everyone knew this.

"It would be best if I didn't return to either dungeon immediately," Ami thought out loud with the possessed swordswoman's voice, "I need to check whether that book is safe or not first."

"Sounds reasonable. I must say, I'm rather curious what's in it," the blonde said in her own mannerism, appearing to the onlookers as if she was talking to herself.

"Noted. I'll drop you off somewhere in the desert," Jadeite said, having to raise his voice to be heard over the noise of the crowd. The group descended the stairs into the dimly lit entrance hall, moving slowly through the hustle and bustle.

Ami had a lot of time to admire the architecture, even though it wasn't much to her taste. Too many carved skulls decorated the massive pillars of ebony stone that held up the cupola of the building. Aside from the decorations, the hall rather reminded her of a canopied rail platform, if one had been built with medieval construction techniques and materials. The smell of the sweaty crowd gathered under the vaulting roof, forming a haze in the air. However, a long row of alcoves along the left wall, filled with larger-than-life statues of warriors smashing and stabbing each other drew her attention. Particularly the last and newest one. "What is *that*?" she cried in Cathy's voice, eyes wide open and blazing red as she lifted one hand to cover her mouth.

"Keep moving!" the white-haired orc behind her grumbled, and she felt a push from behind. Taking over control from the stunned Keeper, Cathy walked on, while being treated to the strange sensation of her cheeks warming while experiencing none of the appropriate emotions. The last set of sculptures that had surprised the blue-haired girl so was one of the final moments of her battle with the Reaper, aptly chosen to provide maximum embarrassment to both combatants. It showed the horned demon doubling over with a comically exaggerated grimace of pain on his face, because the barely-dressed, slender girl dangling head-over from his grip punched him in the stomach. The artist clearly had taken some

liberties, as Cathy didn't remember Mercury being so well-developed.

"Well..." Jered began, scratching his skin as his eyes lingered on the statue, "I think each of these statues displays the highlight of a past duel."

Ami felt a near-irresistible urge to elbow him in the ribs as she seized control of her host body once more and hid her face in her palms. "This is horrible," she blurted out, aware that whoever had created the sculpture had managed to capture a good likeness of her face, which meant that she would remain on display here for who knew how long.

"Ahem, well, taking the cultural difference into account could make you feel somewhat better about this," Snyder said, coughing into his hand as he made a point of not looking at the statue while walking toward the exit. "If you look around, you will notice that almost nobody is wearing more than that sculpture is, so they should not consider it anything out of the ordinary." True to his words, most of surrounding creatures were wearing loincloths and pieces of armour, revealing a large amount of leathery or bristly green and reddish skin in the process.

"Maybe you are right," Ami conceded, sounding unconvinced.

"Just put this place on your list of targets to hit when you take over the world, if it bothers you so much," Jadeite quipped cheerfully. Cathy's cheeks blushed as Ami, still in control of the blonde's body, heard the dark general's voice. With some relief and just a hint of secret disappointment, she noted that he didn't show more than passing interest for the work of art.

A black ellipse opened in thin air, depositing the two blonde figures who stepped through on top of an ash-grey dune. The sky was blue, rather than the poisonous green close to Ami's dungeon. Heat flickered in the air as possessed Cathy raised her arms, eyes flashing bright as a burst of blue sprang from her fingers, forming into an icy column that glittered in the sunlight and quickly turned

into a copy of Keeper Mercury. A black shape hung briefly in the air between the swordswoman and the freshly-created, chainmail-wearing golem before the darkness flowed over the construct like a coat of tar and sank into its substance.

Ami, now animating the simulacrum, nodded at Cathy and Jered, who were standing next to each other and already starting to sweat from the suffocating temperatures. "Thank you, Jadeite," the simulacrum gurgled with a smile and waved her hands in a complicated gesture. Two thick fur blankets flared into existence, coalescing from glowing motes of poor mana. "Please take the others immediately to the Arctic while I deal with Azzathra's tome and shut down the dungeon here."

"Aww, I kind of liked it here," Cathy replied as she took the fluffy covers from Mercury's outstretched arms, "it had its comforts. Yeah, I know," she drawled upon seeing the disapproving frown on the other girl's frozen features, "not safe any more. But I bet I'll miss the place until you have figured out how to make some comfortable rooms with your new dungeon heart."

"We can afford staying at an inn," Jadeite commented, stepping closer to the short-skirted blonde. With a nod to the possessed golem, he shimmered out of existence, taking Cathy with him.

"Mercury Power, Make Up!" the sculpture cried out and was engulfed in a flash of blue light that left her clad in Sailor Mercury's uniform. Curious about the book's content despite its origin, the statue summoned her visor and retrieved the black volume from Keeper storage. It dropped to the ground, burying itself halfway in the powdery sand. Ami consulted her scanner's readout. So far, the brass-bound tome read as not magical at all. Proceeding with caution, the young Keeper carefully leafed through the manual, committing each of its pages to her computer's memory. Once she had verified that she hadn't missed a page, she dropped the book to the ground and incinerated it with a lightning bolt. The paper burned to ash almost instantly, while the metal covers survived a bit longer, melting into rivulets that sank into the still-liquid glass that had formed around the impact point. Satisfied that this artefact of the dark gods would not be able to harm anyone, Ami turned her attention to the next task at hand. She could read her copy later.

"Attention, everyone. This is Keeper Mercury speaking," Ami's voice echoed through the heads of her creatures as she stood in front of a giant eyeball on a stalk, holding its glistening bottom in her icy hands like a ball. The magical device reinforced the telepathic projection so that even sleeping monsters were ripped out of their dreams by the Keeper's amplified voice. Around her, the crystal balls on the benches went out and split open, their curved surface parting like the petals of a flower as they flattened themselves on the bench they had been standing on. Moments later, the bench itself crumbled into its component parts, which clattered to the floor and turned into a blue-white mist that shot off in the direction of the dungeon heart. *I am abandoning this dungeon for strategic reasons. All of you are entitled to your full salary for this month. Make sure to take it from the treasury set aside close to the portal when you leave. Thank you for your service."*

Immediately, Ami could hear rushed footsteps reverberate through the stone down to her location, some made by clawed and some by soled feet. She let her gaze sweep over her dismantling command centre for the last time, pausing for a moment on the house-sized lifeless aquarium that had once contained colourful liquid golems used to form maps. They had all perished in Azzathra's sabotage of her imps, and even as she watched, the glass panels forming the enormous basin cracked and came loose at the seams. A wave of water spilled out, flooding the room and washing the glass splinters away. Ami, bracing herself against the flow of the knee-deep tide, felt slight regret at destroying her first innovative room, but it was better than leaving it behind for enemies to salvage. She would rebuild, better and more efficiently! Eyes narrowing in determination, the blue-and-white uniformed ice sculpture disappeared from the darkening room that was crumbling all around her.

Mercury's slender figure reappeared, a mere shadow in front of the green light shining out of the dungeon heart's pit. The organic artefact's heartbeat went faster than usual, corresponding to its unusual level of activity. Clouds of glowing fog spiralled around the ground floor of the main chamber, forming three denser streams that flowed up the pyramid upon which the dungeon heart rested. They

rushed into the pit above its pulsing, veined membrane, each torrent of reclaimed infrastructure entering through a different arch of the superstructure. At a steady rate, piles of gold crystallised around the artefact's outer wall as it consumed the rooms and traps it had created long ago. Just as fast as the precious metal appeared, Ami banished it into the desert, to a location as far out as the limited range of her Keeper powers allowed. She couldn't transport it to her new dungeon right now, but it was extremely improbable that someone would stumble over the treasure out there in the sandy wasteland before she could recover it. At the very least, the gold was less likely to be found there than here in her increasingly empty dungeon. In her mental view, traps shattered into their component pieces, doors dropped off their hinges, and furniture melted into azure mist, all of which rushed toward the dungeon heart. To someone unaware of what was happening, it might have looked as if a powerful storm was ripping objects from their position, smashing them into tiny pieces, and grinding them into dust that formed swirling clouds whipping in the winds.

Soon enough, Ami's concentrated work came to its logical conclusion, leaving a complex of nothing but empty tunnels and hollowed out rock behind, still lit by the magic of the dungeon heart. A few stragglers plodded through the tunnels, prompting the impatient ice senshi to pick them up and deposit them close to the portal personally. Now, she only needed to deactivate the dungeon heart, which would cause the ceiling to collapse on it. This would also also kill off the body she was wearing, but that was no big loss, because it would have gone inert due to a lack of mana to sustain it anyway. *At least I'll have some time to plan what to do next while I travel all the distance to the Arctic in shadow form,* Ami thought.

A pillar of ash-grey sand stabbed into the sky, carried upwards by a torrent of azure light fountaining out from between the dunes. It fought the sunlight for predominance for several seconds before faltering and dissipating, leaving only a curtain of curling dust behind, which dispersed slowly into the winds.

"Argh, my eyes! Plague and torments!" a raspy voice swore loudly, coming from the unlikely source of an imp, who had been watching

the phenomenon from a few kilometres away. It was covering its bulbous eyes with both three-fingered hands, rubbing at the red-blazing orbs with their backs.

"Well, look at that," a second voice resounded from behind and above the imp, "Lord Azzathra will be displeased." The new voice was female, and a curvy shadow fell over the tiny greenish-brown creature in the sand.

"Thank you Alphel. I would *never* have figured that out without your help," the imp grumbled, still blinking to clear its eyes from the after-images of the blinding light.

The female, clad in little more than a few black leather belts that showed off the prodigious amounts of scar tissue covering every inch of her body, patted the creature's bald head with her her clawed gauntlets and cackled behind her face-concealing black hood. "And that, my *dear* Morrigan, is why I will collect his reward on Mercury's head, and not you! Oh ho ho ho- bawk! Bawk? BAWK!"

The imp scratched its chin, ignoring the chicken that had replaced the voluptuous woman and was now pecking at its heels. "I wonder where her other dungeon heart is. Oh well, saves me the expense of creating my own dungeon here." Morrigan heard an ominous crackling behind itself and saw its shadow in the sand darken. "Oh shi-"

"Bawk!" The chicken's red eyes blazed bright like miniature suns as they unleashed twin bolts of lightning at their diminutive target, who disappeared out of the path of the zig-zagging streams of electricity just in time. A rather less mobile sand dune took the brunt of the attack, and molten glass dripped down like blood from the pin-prick sized wound in its flank.

"Gee, Alphel, you always get so upset about things," the imp mocked its feathery foe from another hill of sand. "That temper of yours will be your undoing one day."

"Is this a private party, or can anyone join?" a male voice asked from above. The chicken looked up, cocking its head so that its crest fell over its right eye, and stared at the figure floating in the greenish

sky, a black silhouette with red eyes against the disk of the sun.

"Another one? Damnation, is this the Keeper annual tea party or what?" Morrigan croaked, trying to place the newcomer. Something about the warlock's oily black hair rattled something familiar in its mind. "Arachne! What are you even doing here? You worship the Vermin Lord, not Master Azzathra!"

"Oh, I doubt dear Azzy will care very much who gets rid of the little bitch," Arachne commented, causing the hen to flap its wings in outrage. A moment later, the transformation spell wore of, leaving a curvy dark mistresses moving her arms up and down in its place.

"That doesn't answer the question of what you get out of it," Alphel drawled with disdain, puffing out the scarred chest of her borrowed body as she spoke.

"Revenge, of course," Arachne hissed, his voice dripping with malice. "That blue-haired whore has interfered with my plans twice, and I'm going to return the favour. However," the possessed warlock grinned smugly, "I am willing to let you two take the first stab at her. I know something that you don't, and it will get you *burnt*." The floating figure laughed, crossing his arms over the black and purple chest part of his high-collared robe.

"Nice posturing, almost believable," Morrigan commented. "However, this whole excursion has been a big waste of my valuable time." With no further fanfare, the imp disappeared into a rotating swirl of green motes.

"Eh. What it said," the scarred female agreed. She jumped off of the steep side of the dune with a running start, somersaulting once in the air before dropping into its shadow which rose to meet her, wrapping around her body and devouring her.

This left the crimson eyed warlock hovering alone above the lifeless wasteland. Arachne grinned widely. "Fools."

The black, formless shadow that was Ami raced over the ocean,

unable to feel the wind rushing past her. In the distance, she could make out an elongated spot of white that gleamed like a pearl in the surrounding blueness. Her iceberg grew rapidly larger in her sight, and before she knew it, she was passing through the layers of snow and ice as if they didn't exist, until the spherical crystal of her dungeon heart filled up her field of vision. An instant later, she fell out the other side of the orb, corporeal once more. Immediately, she felt the rush of ice-cold air cause goosebumps on her vast amounts of exposed skin. With a clang of metal, her few pieces of armour impacted the floor, drowning out the softer thud of her bare flesh making contact with the freezing cold ground. All the pain of her injuries, suspended while she was possessing others, returned at the same time. The blue-haired girl let out an agonised scream when her ruined left hand smacked into the base of her dungeon heart, nearly drowning own the pangs coming from her broken shin, which was only somewhat stabilised by the Reaper greaves she was wearing. The sudden noise brought her companions running, who paused at the sight of the whimpering and underdressed girl.

"Don't just stand there and gawk! Jadeite, levitate her off of the freezing ground. Gently!" Cathy ordered, shaking the others out of their daze. "Jered, bring her some of the blankets! Snyder, she needs healing!"

Nodding, the acolyte approached the teenager, who was now floating stiffly in the air. He was wearing a fluffy mantle over his usual white-and-red robes, and blushed furiously as his gaze swept professionally over Ami's topless form. The girl was already remedying that problem herself by using her fabrication spell, which turned out to be far more difficult with only one hand. On the second try, a white strip of cloth wrapped around her torso, taking care of that distraction. Her cheeks turned deep red, forming a sharp contrast to the pallor of the rest of her face. This short moment had felt more embarrassing than all the time in the arena, partly because she wasn't in mortal danger right now, and partly because she knew everyone here. She wondered just how much attention Jadeite had paid, and blushed harder.

"Hold the leg still for a moment," Snyder requested as he removed Ami's metal greaves. She bit her teeth together and nodded,

trembling slightly in the cold. "Hmm, the broken leg is easy enough to deal with, but you seem to also have some internal bruising, and the left hand," he winced at the sight of the bloody lump of flesh and went green in the face, "is completely beyond my abilities, sorry. I can stop the bleeding, but we will have to ask a fully-trained priest for help."

Ami nodded, resisting the urge to recoil at the touch of his holy healing magic. With a barely-suppressed shudder, she asked "Is that feasible without being found out as a Keeper? I'd really like to keep the hand, but I can't enter temples..."

"We can bring you to an inn and ask a healer to come to you, stating that you are too wounded to move," Jered brought up with almost no hesitation. "The real problems are the hair and the eyes, as well as an explanation for the origin of your injuries."

"Not much of a problem," Jadeite interrupted as he approached, his steps echoing across the icy chamber. "Allow me?" he asked, reaching for Ami with a white-gloved hand.

"All right," the senshi agreed, managing to not blush more as he touched her upper-arm. She felt a tingling sensation, and a strand of hair dangling in front of her eyes switched colour as the glamour took hold of it.

"Blonde?" she asked, crossing her eyes to see better.

"With blue eyes. You'll fit right in with the rest of us," the dark general said, pointing at himself and Cathy, who had a similar combinations of hair and eye colours.

"Family resemblance. Good thinking," Jered complimented. "We can say she got trapped in a rock slide - she has no cuts or stab wounds. Yes, that should work."

"Until she shies away from holy magic," the swordswoman pointed out one of the flaws in the plan.

"I could sleep through the treatment," Ami pointed out in a quiet tone of voice, "I wouldn't mind going to sleep and only waking up after

everything stops hurting so much."

"Sounds like a plan," Jadeite confirmed, "let's not waste any time, then. Ready, Mercury?"

The fake blonde nodded, and she felt strong arms catch her as she slipped into unconsciousness, accompanied by pleasant dreams for a change.

Mouth-watering smells permeated the air in the tavern, emerging from the kitchen and snaking their way through the evening crowd sitting in groups at their tables, chatting, laughing, and enjoying their meals. Nobody was paying special attention to the trio of blondes sitting on one of the worn benches in the corner, with their backs to the white-painted walls. The brown-haired man sitting across from them at the table had an air of shiftiness around him that might have invited more suspicious glances and reassuring grips to the coin purse, had not an acolyte been sitting to his left. Thus, he probably wasn't up to no good.

The waitress approached the group of five with a tablet of beverages and winked at the handsome blond sitting at the very right as she leaned down, which earned her a sour glance from his teenage sister. *Must be feeling cross from having her arm in that sling,* the well-endowed woman pondered as she put the mugs down in front of the individuals. She pouted slightly when the target of her wink failed to take notice of her, and proceeded to the next table with an insulted swish of her dress.

Jered reached over and traced his finger across Ami's glass, getting some of the dark red liquid trickling past its edge onto his fingertip, which he took to his mouth and tasted. "Grape juice? Seriously? Come on, we are celebrating your victory! Live a little!" He took a hearty swig from his own tankard of frothy ale. "Ah, that hits the spot!"

"I'm too young to drink in my country," the teenager pointed out patiently, which drew a round of snickers from the table. "What?"

"Well, considering your current job..." Cathy chortled, her face flushed from half-emptying her own mug already.

Ami thought for a bit and joined in with a giggle. "Yes, I can see how this would be humorous."

"Now, I'm curious," Jadeite said, searching for a topic that would be safe for conversation in public while they waited for their meal, "did you already check your prize?"

A shadow flickered over the girl's face at the reminder, but she discretely pulled out her computer and shook her head. "I can have a look at it now, I suppose." She gazed at the display, occasionally hitting a button to turn a page. Typing one-handed was such a pain. Under her bandages, the fingers of her left hand were itching terribly as they healed.

"Well, what does it say?" Cathy asked, craning her neck to catch a glimpse of the screen. From the other side, Snyder was doing the same.

"Some of my opponent's knowledge, as advertised," Ami reported what she was seeing. "There's a lot about fighting techniques for a scythe. Oh, and the spell he was using to summon his equipment."

The swordswoman shook her head. "All right. So you got a spell that armours your shins and shoulders and removes protection everywhere else, and advanced techniques for an inefficient weapon that require the user to be larger and stronger than his opponent. Some gift."

"It clearly demonstrates the spirit in which it was given," Snyder pointed out. He was drinking wine in moderation, and put his glass down as he continued. "Useless at best, dangerous at worst."

"Oh, she might still find a use for that spell, if you know what I mean." Jered backed up his statement with a long look in Jadeite's direction and a knowing grin, which caused Ami to cough and blush furiously. Even the dark general threw him a disapproving glance. Fortunately for the green-dressed man, the arrival of steaming meals delayed retaliation for the moment.

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Trouble is Brewing

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Ami swept her gaze over the churning sea toward the east, where a red slice of sun peeked out over the curvature of the horizon. Clouds like candyfloss surrounded the glowing disk, forming stripes of orange and pink in the light blue morning sky. A few strands of blue hair peeked out from underneath her woollen cap and whipped in the winds, the same way as the ends of her scarf did. The girl's gaze rose higher, lingering for a moment on the darker tones where a handful of stars still twinkled faintly between the increasingly dense cloud cover. She could almost make out the border upon crossing which the individual puffs of water vapour piled onto each other, turning malevolent shades of deep purple and shadowy blacks as they got close to her iceberg.

"Mercury?" a bleary voice asked from behind. Cathy approached, leaving deep depressions in the snow with her fur-lined boots. Like the blue-haired girl, she was wrapped in a thick winter mantle, and she leaned into the storm as she approached. "What were you thinking, just leaving a message in your room back at the inn and teleporting here? It's too early and too cold!"

"I couldn't sleep," Ami mumbled through the pink cloth of her scarf, having to raise her voice to be heard over the howling of the gale. "So I came back here and worked."

Cathy's expression softened, even though her eyes still squinted to protect themselves against the fast-moving snowflakes that the tempest was pelting her face with. "Bad dreams?"

Ami nodded and hung her head, and the blonde soldier standing to her left could see the dark circles underneath the young Keeper's eyes when the dim sunlight struck her face head-on during the motion.

"Well," Cathy continued after an awkward pause, "that still doesn't explain what you are doing out here, especially in this weather!

Jadeite took one look at it and decided to remain indoors."

If the blonde had hoped that the mention of Ami's crush would entice the younger girl to return to the subterranean safety of her dungeon, she was sorely disappointed. "I am trying to remodel the corruption effect, so I'm checking out how well it is working," the blue-haired girl replied.

Cathy looked around and moved aside, seeking shelter from the storm in the lee of one of the many pointy, tooth-like ice crystals that protruded from the ground everywhere, as if the iceberg had sprouted a forest of stalagmites overnight. "Ah. I had been wondering about those things." She put a gloved hand on one of the smooth facets of the structure, which loomed about twice as tall as she was. Her reflection, bent and twisted within the ice, returned the gesture. Behind it, she could see the distorted disk of the rising sun through the thick ice as if she was looking through violet-stained glass. "However-" she was interrupted by a bright flash of light flaring up within the low-hanging clouds. For a moment, it seemed to suck the colour from the world, turning the landscape into jagged and contrasting black and white contours. Rolling thunder competed against the roar of waves as tall as a house breaking on the shore. Startled, the blonde gulped and settled on a court "Better luck with the next try, then."

Ami's red-glowing eyes lit up with a smile, recognisable even behind her scarf. "Actually, this is an *improvement,*" the girl commented cheerfully.

Cathy grimaced and cocked her head. "I don't think I want to know what it was like before the iceberg decided that it should be a hedgehog and have a pet storm," she said after a moment of deliberation.

"Calmer," Ami admitted. "But I think I got what I wanted. Well, not the ice spikes. They are more of a side effect, and I'm not even sure yet why they showed up," she said, peering at the offending tree-high outgrowths bemusedly, "but the tempest is almost what I was trying for."

"An active defensive measure?" the blonde in winter clothing asked,

pulling her mantle shut tighter around herself.

"Oh, I suppose it does that too," the senshi muttered, "but that wasn't my goal."

"Well, what *is* the point of having a storm overhead making this patch of ice even more inhospitable?" Cathy wondered, pulling her cap deeper into her face and wishing she could go back to the nice, windless tunnels, or even better, back to the heated inn.

Ami didn't notice the blonde's discomfort and gesticulated with her healthy right hand at the sky as she explained "It's more of a side effect. In the first place, I just wanted to stop the corruption from poisoning vegetation, people, and animals. Unfortunately, there is no way to just turn it off, even with my improved dungeon heart, so I had to redirect it so it manifests as something else instead."

"So now it's going to rip out trees by the roots instead and remodelling the landscape. Excellent work," Cathy drawled. Her deadpan tone indicated that this was not necessarily an improvement.

"I think it would have done the latter anyway," Ami pondered, "remember what the Avatar islands looked like? All of that lava didn't appear on its own. This way, the corruption is at least not killing anything directly."

"Emphasis on 'directly'," the swordswoman snorted and let her gaze wander over the windswept ocean. "Can you use it as a weapon?"

The blue-haired girl shook her head. "No. Maybe. I'm sure that I have only scratched the surface of what is possible, but there is a lot about this corruption that I don't understand yet. The more I try to control one particular aspect, the less other aspects do what I expect. I mean, the ice thorns only appeared after I started messing with the poisoning effect, and none of my calculations predicted any of that. Also, I am not willing to perform risky experiments here on the iceberg holding my last dungeon heart to find out. "

"Okay, but I don't understand why you started out working on the corruption, rather than trying to get some rooms up and running. It's

damn cold in this place," Cathy complained with chattering teeth. "I feel like there's icicles growing on my nose! Oh, sure, it's progress, but something more immediately useful would have been preferable."

"Ah, but I did get something useful out of this," Ami corrected her. Both girls felt a momentary disorientation as the young Keeper moved them to the foot of the swimming island's hill. Cathy was briefly distracted by her boots sinking deep into the local snowdrift, and waved her arms to keep her balance. A glance over at Mercury showed that the girl was avoiding that difficulty by floating a hand's width above the ground.

"It's useful for *that*!" Ami shouted, her mantle fluttering in the wind, and lifted her right hand over her head to point up the hills's flank. Lightning flashed in the clouds above, turning the flying girl into a frayed black silhouette against the brightness of the sky. Some larger shadows moved further up on the icy mound.

Cathy blinked while the thunder rumbled, taking in the unexpected sight in front of her. Sounding underwhelmed, she muttered. "Oh. Great. You made a storm, so you decided to build a windmill to go with it. I'm sure it will come in handy if we find ourselves in possession of a large amount of grain for some reason."

"Oh, right, I had forgotten that's what you use them for in this world," Ami sounded amused, rather than annoyed at the casual dismissal of her achievement. Above, the massive blades of ice rotated rapidly in the gale, affixed to a base that protruded like a rounded bunker from the hillside. "Let's go inside, I'll show you what I need it for."

The swordswoman brightened at the prospect of getting out of the freezing wind, even if Mercury's statement left her confused. What *else* would you use a windmill for? With rising curiosity, she waited for the familiar jerking sensation that signified a Keeper transport. The moment she felt solid ground under her feet, she also noticed the short-haired girl's right hand clamping down hard on her left upper arm.

"Please don't move from this spot, this place can be dangerous," Ami warned, speaking up to be heard over the rattling and grinding

of the machinery that occupied the upper parts of the cylinder-shaped room.

"Whoa!" Cathy had expected the interior of the windmill to be cold and dark. Instead, it was warm enough that meltwater was running down the ice walls of the building, and lit bright as day. The colour of the flickering light reflecting off of the chamber's curved surfaces was harsher than torchlight, or even natural sunlight. The blonde looked up toward the source of the light and noise. She saw the expected cogs and gears, spinning rapidly and making a racket, but they only registered as a pale distraction next to the more unexpected feature of the room. A massive bolt of crackling lightning arced between two iron studs, which were connected to a strange whirring metal device with gleaming cables. What amazed her most was the fact that the phenomenon persisted in place, not going away like natural lightning - or even the bolts fired by trigger-happy Keepers - would. "You are somehow extracting magic from the storm with this windmill?" she asked after closing her gaping mouth.

"Not magic, just power," Ami explained, her face pale in the quivering light. Outside, the rotating blades of the windmill were faint shadows visible through the transparent walls behind her. "Electricity. Much less flexible than mana, but essentially free. This place is more of a proof of concept design though, and it won't be able to take the stress for much longer. I built it using my fabrication spell and brittle materials, such as shaped ice, to keep the costs down. It's also not connected to anything right now."

"I see," Cathy lied, having no clue what persistent lightning could be used for, "so, what can you do with it that makes it more important than having proper rooms?"

"Well, you know that my crystal dungeon heart doesn't provide mana, right? So in order to move this iceberg to some place where I can mine more gold, I would first have to spend gold to power the magic. And this floating island is so large and heavy that I would run out of gold before we had even moved out of sight of our current location."

"It doesn't look that big," Cathy objected, sounding rather surprised.

Ami summoned her Mercury computer and held it in her right hand. Her bandaged left hand was still hidden under her mantle, itching while the healing magic she had received in the inn the evening before continued doing its work. It would take around two weeks to fully restore the appendage, or so she had been told. The palmtop snapped open, and unseen fingers hit the keys. Ami felt a guilty warmth in her chest as she thought of Jadeite and his telekinesis instructions, which allowed her to function well even with only a single working hand. She angled the display so that Cathy could easily see it. On the screen, a schema of the iceberg appeared, with a horizontal line indicating the water level. "Here, you can only see this part, the rest is under water," Ami said, indicating the seventh part of the drawing that was above the line. The entire thing weighs," more keys clicked without anyone touching them, "about two billion times more than you."

"No mistake?" the blonde wondered, her blue eyes going wide. The number was too high to register as anything but abstract knowledge, just a word far removed from anything she had ever experienced in normal life. However, the fact that Mercury's tool could figure out how much she weighed mildly offended the blonde's vanity.

Ignorant of her companion's thoughts, Ami elaborated "At first, I was only trying to work around the corruption somehow, but then I got the idea that I could harness it. Turning the Avatar Isles into the scorched wasteland it is today must have required an enormous amount of energy, and if I can tap into even a fraction of that, I'll be able to move this dungeon without consuming any of the gold at all." The blue-haired girl finally took notice of the blonde's long face, and scratched the back of her head with her right hand, dismissing the computer in the process. "I guess you want to hear about some less abstract benefits. How do running hot and cold water, smoke and smell-free lighting, and adjustable temperature for every room sound?"

"That's possible? Why didn't you say so right away? I approve completely!" the female soldier cheered and thrust her fist in the air.

"Well, I still need to actually design the rooms, but adding cables and pipes to the basic-" Ami tried to curb expectations, but was interrupted by an enthusiastic pat on her back that nearly toppled

her.

"Worry about that later! Let's go back to the inn, we are missing breakfast!" Cathy suggested, tugging insistently on the smaller girl's sleeve.

"I can transport you back, but I'm still full from yesterday's celebration," Ami answered, lowering her gaze.

"Bullshit! You barely touched your meal. You didn't defeat that Reaper just so you could get done in by a lack of appetite! I'm making sure that you are eating right, and that's final!"

Within an open pavilion supported by eight slender marble pillars, a blue-haired woman wearing a knee-length white dress over a leotard of same colour moved her fingers in a circle above a basin filled with clear liquid. Golden dust dripped down with each movement. "There, yes. Concentrate... Got it!" Alerted by her exclamation, five similarly-dressed figures hurried to her side from all corners of the well-tended garden. The sixth hopped down from the edge of building's dome, beating her insect-like wings to soften her landing on the dew-covered lawn.

In front of the first fairy, the vision of Jadeite's face, hazy around the edges, appeared to ripple as the trembling of the flat pedestal sent waves through the water. Unaware of the surveillance, the dark general moved a piece of bacon impaled on a fork into his mouth and started chewing.

"Let me see!" Melissa, who was concentrating on the bowl of water resting between two lit red candles, shook when her sister Dandel bumped into her from behind. Only moments later, five more heads with similar high cheekbones and triangular faces leaned in and formed a circle above the scrying device.

"Oh, there he is! Cute!" Anise squealed in delight.

The more observant green-haired fairy ignored the red-head's exclamation. "He's not in the dungeon right now, is he? That looks

like daylight. Melissa, zoom out a bit!"

"Yes, looks like some kind of tavern. Maybe he has already gotten away on his own after freeing us?" Roselle hoped, leaning in so closely that the left candle threatened to set her orange hair on fire.

"He has company," the blonde fairy pointed out.

"You are right. Hey, that short-haired blonde also looks to be about as tall as you, Camilla. Reminds me of someone - wait, that's the Keeper, except with different hair and eye colour!" Within the vision, Mercury was poking warily at her food and glancing around nervously.

The flames of the candle flickered from the resulting shocked gasps. "See how she stares at him greedily whenever he's not looking at her?" the redhead whined, balling her fists in envy.

"Why does a Keeper disguise herself and eat in a tavern?" Tilia, the green-haired fae, wondered.

"Maybe she likes to eat out once in a while?" Camilla thought out loud. The youngest of the fairies eyed the milk, honey, bread, and slices of bacon spread out on the table within the vision with great interest, and could feel her mouth water.

"Don't be silly! She must be plotting something! We must warn the locals!" Dandel took the lead.

"And save that poor misguided hunk from her clutches," Roselle added, and shouts of 'yes' and 'indeed' resounded around the place.

"And the tentacle monster, too!"

In the sudden silence, the sound of fairies shuffling away further from their violet-haired sister was clearly audible. "Cerasse, you *worry* me sometimes," indigo-haired Dandel sighed.

"But I had just trained it to-"

"I don't want to hear it! That thing is disgusting!" Anise interrupted, pressing her hands over her ears. Never mind that there wasn't

enough elbow room around the pedestal, which resulted in angry mutters from her jostled neighbours.

"Ladies, can we focus on the task at hand, please? Melissa, can you zoom out and see where this place is?" Dandel put a stop to the growing argument before it could further disrupt the proceedings.

"I can try, but everything in this land looks pretty much the same to me," the blue-haired fae replied.In the mirror-flat surface of the water, the vision of five people having breakfast around a table dropped downwards and was replaced first by a dusty attic and then by a straw-covered, pointed roof with a smoking chimney built from reddish brick. The vantage point in the water-filled basin rose higher, revealing a wooden stable attached to the right side of the building. Half-enclosed by the L-shape formed by the two structures was a courtyard with a well. It became smaller as the point of view shifted further upwards.

"Hold on," Cerasse scrunched up her brows as she looking down on the small town, consisting of about three dozen buildings with thatched roofs built haphazardly around a central marketplace. "They are *here*!" she concluded in a shrill tone of voice.

"Shush! Don't wake the priests, who were nice enough to let us stay overnight at this shrine," the indigo-haired leader of the group ordered. "Are you sure?"

"Yes! Look, that's us over there, in the garden," the violet-haired fairy pointed out, putting any doubt to rest.

"Can't argue with that evidence. What's the plan?" Tilia asked, brushing her green bangs back behind her triangular tiara.

"We need to act quickly, you know he can teleport!" Anise said immediately. "We can't let this opportunity pass!"

Exasperated, Dandel caught the redhead by the tip of her wings when she tried to storm off. "Not so fast. Keeper Mercury is with him, and we have all seen first-hand just how powerful she is."

"Ow! That hurts, you know! She won't be as strong without her home

field advantage!"

"Yes, and we know her weakness! She was a lot less resistant after Camilla splashed her!" Roselle added, slamming her fist into her open palm. Her orange eyes sparkled with satisfaction as she remembered blasting the blue-haired devil with a surprise blast of lightning that had forced the monster to retreat.

"We have to enlist the help of the priests, too," Cerasse decided. "They can try to undo the brainwashing while we distract Mercury, or maybe stop him from escaping!"

"Sounds good!" The circle of fairies looked into each others eyes, finding their own determination mirrored within their sisters' gazes. They all nodded as one. "Let's do it!"

Last edited: Sep 23, 2017

What a Mess

Originally on 2010-03-01T02:54:00

Ami's group was eating in the same corner of the inn's dining room as the evening before. Despite her lack of appetite, the young Keeper had already devoured half of her breakfast over the course of the meal. Meanwhile, Cathy and the others had been chatting about the weather in general, and Mercury's pet storm in particular.

"Someone is spying on us," Snyder said in a low voice, throwing a significant glance down at the ward dangling from his neck. Ami reflexively looked at her bandaged left arm, but her own wristwatch-like warning amulet was currently missing for medical reasons.

Outside, the short, blonde fairy pressing herself against the wall underneath the windowsill started sweating. Had they noticed her?

"I'll check on it," Ami said quietly as she stood up, "I'll have to go to my room for a moment. Excuse me." Cathy, who had been sitting left of the fake blonde, obligingly slid aside on the bench to let the smaller girl pass. "Please be careful."

Camilla, still listening in, ducked down deeper when a shadow appeared behind the curtains. A moment later, it passed, and the fae let out the breath she had been holding. The small mirror in her hand rose, twisting left and right as she surveyed the interior of the building through the gap in the drapery. *She's gone! Lucky!* The girl rose and bumped her head on the protruding windowsill. Grimacing, she waved toward the stables, where her sisters were lurking on the thatched roof. With the index fingers of both hands, she mimed horns on her head, switched to making walking motions with two fingers, pointed in the direction of the inn's guest rooms, and folded her hands together and rested her cheek on it.

"The Keeper is returning to her room! Now is our chance!" Dandel whispered, interpreting her sister's hand signals. The indigo-haired fairy looked down from the roof at the bald, short-bearded man waiting beside the stable below. "Healer Taleth, her room was the

third from the left on the upper floor, right?"

The priest, who was making shooing motions at a particularly intrusive goat, looked up and nodded blearily. The animal took advantage of his distraction to take a bite out of his white-and-golden robes.

"Good. We'll deal with her while you distract her team! Go!" At Dandel's command, she and three of her sister rose into the air. With a faint humming noise, the four fairies left a trail of glitter in the air as they whooshed around the corner of the inn and out of sight. With a disgusted frown, Taleth put a boot on the goat's forehead and pushed, tearing his robe free from the chewing animal's maw. Moments later, he fled towards the building's entrance, his flabby backside ahead of the beast's horns only by the smallest of margins.

A few blades of yellow straw fell past the window as Ami opened the door to her room. She didn't notice the upside-down face that appeared for a moment at the upper edge of the glass, peering into the rented chamber before withdrawing again. Roselle's wings beat furiously to keep the orange-haired girl up on the roof, where two of her sisters were waiting. "She's in there, all right!"

"Good," Dandel nodded, "you blast the window out of the way and I storm in. Remember to aim for the door so the path is clear for Anise and Tilia, too!"

"Understood," the orange-eyed fae nodded. "That monster won't know what hit her!"

Straw rustled underneath Melissa's thick brush as the blue-haired fairy squatted down and finished painting a large warding scheme onto the thatched roof. "The moment you give the signal, I'll activate the anti-mana ward. Make sure to beat her quickly!"

The door slammed shut behind the newest guest, just a moment before something banged against it from outside. Startled patrons

sank back into their seats and smiled when they recognised the rotund white-and-gold robed figure leaning with his back against the wood, wiping his forehead with his sleeve as he panted.

"Ah, Father Taleth. Ran afoul of Old Billy again, did you?" the innkeeper teased good-naturedly, prompting friendly snickers from the regulars.

"By the Light, I swear that scraggy old beast has it in for me," the healer complained. He remembered his mission, and put on a fake smile as he weaved past the intervening tables and moved toward the group sitting in the corner of the room. "Hello again. How are you?"

"Healer Taleth," Snyder greeted politely, standing up and bowing to the superior-ranked holy man. "We are all fine, thank you. What brings you here?"

"Oh, I wanted to check up on my patient while I was around," he said, looking around the table as if searching for the girl.

"You just missed her," Jadeite spoke up, pointing at Mercury's plate with his fork, "she should be back in a few minutes."

"She seems to be fine. You did good work," Jered acknowledged. "Take a seat and join us, I'm sure she'll want to thank you personally."

"Ah, yes, excellent," the priest said quickly.

"Is something the matter? You look a bit ill yourself," Cathy wondered, fixing the drops of perspiration on the man's brow with a concerned stare.

"No, no, I'm just exhausted from running from that goat. Say, would you mind if I had some of that bacon?" Chair legs scratched over the wooden floor as the healer accepted Jered's offer and pulled his seat closer to the food-laden table. "It's one of my favourites, you see, and..."

Outside the window, Camilla smiled as she listened in. Father Taleth was in position. Now what were her sisters waiting for? The round-cheeked fairy twirled her hand mirror between her fingers as she waited with bated breath. The blonde cringed, and her heart skipped a beat when she heard a raspy voice to her right.

"You are in my way."

Before the startled fae could let out a squeal of fright, something touched her side. Turning, she found herself face to face with huge, bulbous red eyes. They grew larger and larger in the ugly green-brownish face, until the girl realised with horror that it was *her* who was shrinking. The terrified shriek finally escaped her throat, coming out as loud clucking. Even that protest cut off when three fingers clamped shut around her neck like a vice, strangling the fairy-turned-hen. Keeper Morrigan considered the chicken in its hands for a moment, rejoicing in the desperate flapping of its wings as it struggled in vain against his grasp. Wring its neck or have some fun? The imp stretched, standing on tiptoes so it could see over the windowsill, barely. No sign of his quarry. "Well," the creature hissed, glowering at the panicked bird dangling from his grasp, "aren't you the lucky one? It looks as if I need something to amuse myself while I wait."

The window exploded inward, strewing glass shards and shreds of curtain all over the room. Continuing on its path, the bright bolt of electricity struck the rooms's door too, which shook under the impact and bulged into the corridor before tearing off around its hinges. Before the debris came to a rest, a curvy blur holding two short swords bounded in through the opening, hopping over the still-bouncing wood. A second fairy was right behind the first, head ducked low as she darted in at her sisters side. At the same time, what remained of the ragged curtains flew aside as Dandel shot in through the window feet first, stirring up the dust with her rapid wing beat.

"MERCURY, YOUR EVIL WILL END TOD- where is she?" Ansise's angry declaration died on her lips as she surveyed the room. The tips of the redhead's swords followed her gaze, moving from the

scratched wardrobe left of the door, over the uncovered bed littered with glass shards, to the destroyed window across the room. Instead of a cornered Keeper caught in an anti-magic ward and trapped between attackers blocking every available exit, there was only dusty air that smelled of singed pine in the bedroom.

"Dammit! She must have magicked herself away just before we came in! Move to the walls, we may still be able to salvage this," Dandel ordered, positioning herself on top of the bed. "The moment she comes back, we'll pounce, and..."

"She had better come back soon," Tilia commented, even as she took an ambush position, "I can already hear people run up the stairs to find out what made this noise!"

"It can't be helped! Stay ready!"

Two black-gloved hands parted the thick, green foliage of a thorny hedge, allowing the scarred spy hidden within to peek through the gap at the backside of the inn. To the left, across the garden, was that fool Keeper Morrigan, possessing a lowly imp and plucking a live hen in between peering in through the window from time to time. What was the cretin up to now? Spying like this was beneath her, Dark Mistress Juzint, greatest assassin of Keeper Alphel! Of course, if the Master ordered her, she had to obey. Still, this task would have been unbearably boring without at least the thorns pricking her flesh.

A loud bang, followed by the rattling impacts of debris striking the ground, caused the imp's head to whip around. The hidden observer and an old goat munching on the cabbages were no less startled, and raised their gaze to the upper floor windows, where a plume of dust was escaping from a breach. Was that some white-clothed fairy fluttering in the air? It didn't matter to Juzint. She had just spotted something far more important, something that stupid Morrigan couldn't see from his spot so close to the wall. Razor-sharp blades sprang from the woman's fingertips as she searched the sunlit roof for the nearest shadow. The chimney was casting a line of darkness onto the straw, which would suit her needs just fine.

Glass and tableware clinked from the sudden crash that shook the building, making everything on the tables that wasn't weighed down vibrate.

"Shit! What was that?" Cathy shouted as she jumped to her feet.

"That sounded as if it had come from above," Jered said, sliding his chair backward. Throughout the room, conversations ceased and heads turned in the direction of the noise.

"I'll check on it," Jadeite said, and disappeared from his spot in a blur of vertical lines. Father Taleth, who had been just about to call for calm, paled. That hadn't been part of the plan! How was he supposed to do his part now?

Cathy wasn't dissuaded from taking action yet. Over the rising noise level caused by tables and chairs being shuffled, she shouted "All right, we better go after him! Snyder, don't be so slow!" Other patrons had the same idea. Fearing for their belongings, they stampeded toward the staircase, the innkeeper at their head. At the sight of the crowd of people pressing against each other, shouting, and congesting the passage, the scar-faced blonde hesitated. "It's probably faster if we go around! Follow me!" The tall woman reversed direction and hurried toward the nearby window instead, ripping the curtains aside as she raised her knee and put her boot on the windowsill.

Jadeite shimmered into existence in front of Mercury's room, finding its door missing. Through the gap, he could see right through the splinter-coated room and out of the empty space where the window used to be. Of more immediate concern were the three females within the chamber, none of which looked like Sailor Mercury. With a start, he recognised the white-clad, winged women as three of the fairies he had released the day before. The widening of their eyes when they spotted him proved that the recognition was mutual. *Maybe I shouldn't have chosen a town so close to that meadow.* "You again? Put down your weapons and explain *this*," the dark general demanded in an icy tone of voice, gesturing at the ruined

room.

Dandel took a step forward. "We wanted to help you break free from the Keeper!"

"Yes, come with us before she returns," Tilia added with a winning smile, brushing some of the dust out of her green hair. "She will find out eventually that you helped us escape and then-"

Blue light flashed between the three fairies, and a wave of snow-carrying frost brushed over the exposed skin of their limbs. Within the swirl of snowflakes, Ami materialised, holding a crystal ball in her right hand. She blinked in surprise at the state of her room. Only a split-second later, movement seen from the corner of her eye made her leap backwards with a start. Anise's downward-slashing blow passed right in front of her face, reflecting the glow of Mercury's bright-red eyes. Wait, red? Before Ami could regain her footing, her back slammed hard into something that shouldn't have been there. The indigo-haired obstacle gasped in pain as her lunge ended with her chin colliding with Mercury's spine.

"Mercury, down!" Jadeite warned, somewhat unnecessary, because both she and Dandel were already falling over each other and tumbling to the floor. A moment later, she heard a gasp from the redhead and from the green-haired fairy, and two large blurs shot past overhead. Twin cries of pain accompanied the cracking of wood as both slender bodies smashed hard into the wall opposite the door, one on each side of the broken window.

The indigo-haired fae heard the two bodies bounce and drop to the floor behind her. She redoubled her struggles to get out from underneath Mercury's weight. Her heart sank when she caught a glimpse of the curly-haired blonde man standing in the doorway. With his palm pointing at her and his eyes glowing a cold white, he looked more frightening than handsome. The realisation that he was outside the room, and therefore beyond the area of affect of Melissa's ward, came too late. Behind her, Tilia and Anise groaned and whimpered. This was going all wrong, Dandel cursed inwardly. If only she could reach her knife!

Ami couldn't see the woman squirming underneath her back, and

rolled to her right in order to cushion her weight on her good arm. With only one hand to use, her options were extremely limited. Her magic wasn't responding, and it had only been luck that Jadeite had been here to foil this ambush. She could see metal gleaming, and her hand shot up just in time to grab the wrist bringing down a wicked-looking dagger toward her neck. Both girls reared up as they pitted strength against strength, and the sharp point of the weapon wavered too close to Ami's skin for comfort. Her opponent was pressing down with both hands now, glaring at her over the handle of the weapon with a look that was half hate and half despair, but making no headway against Mercury's senshi strength. Ami now recognised the scraped face, and couldn't help but feel sorry for the fairy, who was acting on good but misguided intentions.

"Melissa, WATCH OUT!" came a frightened shout from outside the window, followed by a flash and the smell of ozone. Ami could see her opponent's pupils contract as the fairy tensed up in fright.

Keeper Morrigan, distracted by the loud banging noise from somewhere higher up in the building, didn't notice the window flying open above him in time to avoid the heavy boot stamping down on his head.

"Whoa!" Cathy hadn't expected to encounter an obstacle while climbing out of the window, and hit her rump onto the ledge when the unstable footing gave out under her. "Ow! What the - oh crap!" A glance down revealed what exactly had ruined her smooth exit from the room. The blonde stomped down harder, grinding the wriggling imp's face deeper into the mixture of dust and chicken feathers on the ground. Glaring, she saw the poor animal whom the feathers belonged to struggle weakly, its throat caught in the critter's grasp. The hen was lacking most of its plumage, and bloody depressions dotted her skin where the imp had pulled the feathers out .

"Cathy, what's going on?" Jered appeared behind the blonde while she was drawing her sword, intent on putting the imp to a quick end.

Morrigan had enough of tasting dirt. With a mighty growl - for an imp - the Keeper's borrowed body bucked underneath Cathy's feet.

Before the swordswoman could stab down and put an end to his shenanigans, she noticed with horror that the blade in her hand was growing feathers, and she felt herself shrinking. Morrigan jumped to his feet, easily throwing off the now much-reduced weight of the transformed woman. He kicked at the mottled chicken, but even as a bird, Cathy was still a soldier, and Mercury's combat enchantments didn't just go away. She flapped her new wings, instinctively knowing how to use them, and bounded upwards. The leg sweep only clipped her tail feathers, and she used the passing limb as a foothold to hop forward and launch herself at the imp's face. Each of the lamp-like, baleful red eyes was as tall as her head - an easy target!

With a shrill squeak of fury, Keeper Morrigan backhanded Cathy away, sending her off spinning and trailing feathers. With its remaining eye, the imp saw the wavy-haired fool in the window draw his arm back, his teeth bared in anger. The dagger hummed as it parted the air, burying itself up to the haft into the ground where the possessed creature had just been standing. With a cry of defiance, Morrigan hurled the limp, maltreated hen in his hand at his attacker. Jered leaned aside to dodge the rotating poultry, and got struck in the face by a petite, blood-soaked shin when the Keeper's earlier victim expanded back into her natural form in mid-flight. So did the feathers strewn across the grass, transforming into pieces of white cloth sprinkled with blood. Normally, Jered wouldn't have minded a beautiful girl wearing nothing but a few scraps collapsing on him, but right now, his girlfriend was in danger. As gently as he could under the circumstances, he handed the bleeding fairy off to Snyder and Father Taleth, who were standing behind him.

They knelt down next to the choking fae sprawled out on the floor. The acolyte blushed at the sight of her mostly bare skin, scratched up and smeared as it may be, and draped a tablecloth over her. A soft moan and brief flicker in her tear-filled, amber eyes informed him that she appreciated the gesture. The older priest was more intent on dealing immediately with the black-and-blue bruises covering all of her neck, which seemed a more pressing problem than the small patches of missing skin.

Like a column of tar, Juzint's black-masked face and shoulders rose from the shadow that the red-bricked chimney was casting onto the inn's thatched roof. Unaware, her target stood with her back to the scarred assassin, channelling magical power into a diagram painted onto the straw. The dark mistress' tongue wetted her lips in anticipation of the kill. The sight of the girl neatly explained why her Master's rival, Morrigan, was here. But while that fool was lurking about in the garden, playing with farm animals, she had already located his quarry! The figure standing in the centre of the ward on the roof matched the description of that upstart Keeper whom both Morrigan and her own Master wanted dead: teenage girl, harmless-looking, blue hair. What a triumph it would be if she were to be the one to destroy this enemy, right under Morrigan's nose! She dragged the rest of her body out of the shadow without a sound and ducked behind the cover of the chimney. Throwing knives? Lightning? No, she would give this a personal touch. Razor blades gleamed at the end of her hands like overly long fingernails. Like a falcon swooping down on its prey, she darted out of her cover, clearing the crest of the roof with a single bound and letting her arc carry her toward the Keeper's winged back, claws extended.

"Melissa, WATCH OUT!" an orange-haired fairy fluttering somewhere ahead shouted, but Juzint didn't let herself be distracted. Whoever Melissa was didn't matter, only her target, Mercury, was important.

Bright light flew from Roselle's hand, crossing the distance between the orange-haired fairy and her sister's attacker in less than an eye blink. The pinkish-white arcs of lightning from the hurried shot fanned out, raking the left arm of the blurring shadow, just before she could reach her target. Juzint suppressed an exultant cry of joy at the pain, concentrating instead on the fact that her muscles had seized up for a moment and were slowing her down! Cursed interference, even if it felt so great! Her intended victim was whirling around to face her, but seemed to move so slowly. The twisted woman felt her perception speed up, and she could see the enemy's blue eyes go wide as she realised the danger she was in. As if in slow motion, the assassin saw the sudden tension of her target's arm muscles as she threw all of her weight backward, the delicious fear in her sapphire eyes, and then, finally, the disbelieving,

agonised jerk as sharpened steel claws cut through yielding flesh. Darkness and Damnation! A spasm went through Juzint's leg, just at the wrong instant. The flow of time seemed to return to normal, but instead of intestines spilling out of the blue-haired girl's stomach, only blood surged from the four crimson lines drawn across her belly. Oh well, a second strike would-

Reacting violently to the disruption of Melissa's concentration, the magical diagram on the roof discharged a blast of verdant magic into the sky with a loud hiss. The shockwave tossed both opponents standing at its centre into the air like rag dolls.

In the room below the failing ward, Ami felt energised as her magic stopped being torn from her body. In contrast, the indigo-haired fairy fighting to overcome the young Keeper's grip on her dagger-wielding hands faltered, and an expression of fright flitted over her features. With a feeling of triumph, Ami channelled magic into the hand blocking Dandel's downward stab, causing the limb to glow black. Immediately, the pressure let up. Perhaps realising what was happening, the fairy tried to draw back, but it was too late. With her life energy drained, she slumped to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut, joining her two sisters.

"Jadeite, what's happening?" Ami asked, her heart beating rapidly in her chest as she jumped to her feet and surveyed the room for any signs of more attackers.

The dark general took a step forward. "I have no idea. I suggest we get out of here, there could be four more of them around!"

The loud rumbling of a mob of people running quickly over a wooden floor resounded through the hallway. "Look ahead, that's the place!" "The door's gone!" "Get the burglars!" "My inn! Make those vandals pay!"

Ami and the curly-haired blond exchanged a quick look and faded out of sight, just as the first angry faces peered into the room.

Running as fast as the one-eyed imp's legs could carry him, Morrigan alternated between cursing the stupidity of rural companion animals, and wishing a slow, painful death on the fool who had set off this explosion and ruined a whole night of work. He didn't particularly enjoy going over atlas after atlas in pain-staking detail, just to locate an insignificant town he had seen through his scrying glass.

The noise of clattering hooves right behind him reminded him that his pursuers were catching up. Stupid goat! Didn't it know that he was one of the Lords of the Underworld? Truly a supremely imbecile beast! Nevertheless, it did have sharp horns, and so Morrigan kept running, staying barely ahead of the animal's aggressively-lowered head. The fact that the chicken riding on its back sounded as if it was laughing did nothing to calm the Keeper's temper. A flash of light and movement in the sky momentarily drew his attention. Two glitter-dripping fairies, one carrying the wounded other, entered his field of vision. Irrelevant. The third shape arcing through the sky, clad only in a few bands of black, was much more infuriating. "ALPHEL! So this is your doing!" the imp bellowed as the dark mistress plummeted toward him.

The mottled hen on the goat's back, being neither occupied with running nor with giving chase, could immediately see where this was going, and flapped her wings. She abandoned ship just in time for the scarred woman to smash into the ground, trip up the fleeing one-eyed imp, and subsequently being bowled over by the goat charging into both of them. The resulting ball of flailing limbs ploughed a trail through the cabbage field, spraying leaves and dirt into the air. A vile mixture of bleating, ecstatic moans, and shouted curses accompanied its advance. The obscenities suddenly cut off, and Cathy-the-Hen had the impression of something dark and red-eyed shooting off into the sky like a thundercloud. Yes, much better washing her hands of this mess. While chickens weren't very good fliers, it was enough for her to make it back to the open ground floor window. Behind it, she could see Jered gesticulating wildly at Mercury, who was edging away from him. No wonder, as he still had his daggers in hand. As she swooped in, Cathy could hear the tail end of their conversation.

"...understand. We must find her! - oh, there she is!" Jered tucked his daggers away and caught his transformed girlfriend as she made an end run toward his chest. Pressing the large bird gently against his green shirt, the weasel-featured man whirled back to Ami. "All right, let's get out of here!"

"I'm really very sorry about this," the blue haired girl said while bowing to Father Taleth, smiling sadly. The portly healer, pale, shivering, and clearly terrified of the red-eyed Keeper, had nevertheless taken a combat stance between her and the injured fairy resting on the ground. "Thank you again for healing me. I did not mean any harm. We will leave you in peace now." With a flash of blue, two people and one bird vanished into a swirl of snow.

"Camilla, I'm so sorry. I should have never positioned you there alone," Dandel apologised, holding her youngest sister's hands.

The blonde raised her head from Tilia's lap, and bared her teeth in a weak smile. "Don't worry about it too much," she whispered hoarsely, "Father Taleth fixed us all up almost as good as new."

"Yes, if anyone has to take the blame, it should be me," Cerasse pointed out. "I should have predicted that she would have hidden guards around! It's only logical!"

"This was such a disaster! Complete and total failure," Anise raged, kicking one of the inn's chairs in anger.

"Anise! Calm yourself! We don't have enough money to waste it frivolously after paying for the repairs, so leave the furniture alone!" Soft-spoken Melissa protested, holding her belly as she sat up.

"Not a complete failure," Camilla breathed quietly. The blonde swallowed a few times to loosen her sore throat, and continued. "I- I overheard her minions talk about her plan. It's bad! She is making some progress controlling storms!"

The others blanched. "A Keeper with power over the weather - it would be a disaster! The Lord of the Land needs to know about

this!"

Last edited: Aug 16, 2017

A Chat With the Other Senshi

Originally on 2010-03-05T00:28:00

"How long until she turns back?" Jered asked, pressing the mottled chicken in his arms closer to his chest. The hen in question clucked and turned her head so that one beady eye was staring directly at Ami's face.

Small, glowing numbers scrolled over the transparent visor covering the blue-haired girl's face, and a sequence of rapid clicking noises echoed off of the surrounding ice as telekinetic fingers danced invisibly over the Mercury computer's keyboard. "Going by the data here," Ami said, looking at the outline of a woman superimposed over that of a chicken, "right about-"

The wavy-haired man's head jerked backwards in surprise when the quickly-expanding form of the hen pushed his arms apart and gained in size, curves, and weight. With a startled yelp, the mass clinging to his chest toppled him.

"-now. Are you all right?" Ami's good hand went to her mouth as she blinked down at the two figures on the ground.

Cathy slid off of her boyfriend's chest, pulling herself to her feet with the aid of the teenager's outstretched arm. "I'm fine."

"Ow. That's twice today," Jered groaned. Little puffs of condensing breath escaped from behind Ami's hand as she giggled lightly at his predicament. "Yeah, I'm fine too, but the ground is cold. Thanks, Cathy." He stood with the woman's help and rolled his shoulders to work the cricks out of the muscles.

"You know, this wasn't so bad," Cathy said, throwing a wistful glance at the weasel-featured man as she shivered. "At least it was warm with all those feathers and enveloped in big arms." A frown appeared on her brow. "And now, someone tell me what the hell was going on back there!"

"Mercury was ambushed by the fairies she had taken prisoner earlier, and from the looks of it, another Keeper was trying something too," Jered said. "Apparently, they got into each other's way. Lucky for us."

"The fairy interference was my fault. I would not have chosen to return to that location if I had expected them to stick around for a while. My apologies, Mercury," Jadeite said, bowing his head.

"Some of them got hurt badly." Ami let out a sigh. "I hope nobody blames them for what happened. Or blames the priest for healing me." She remembered the face of the portly man as he had stared at her, looking appalled as he faced her to protect the injured fairy on the ground. "I don't think we should return to normal towns unless it's unavoidable, if it leads to people getting hurt."

Cathy's gaze swept over the surrounding ice with disapproval, and she wrapped her arms tighter around herself. "Joy."

"Actually, I would like to bring up that the enemy could only have located us by scrying on us. Finding the location shown in the scrying glass, assuming no prior knowledge of it, is non-trivial," Snyder said, smoothing out his red hair. "I believe that simply not staying in the same location for more than a short time will effectively make it impossible for an enemy to track us down. In any case, they shouldn't be able to pin-point an iceberg surrounded by featureless ocean accurately enough to transport troops here."

"That's a good point," Jered said, "some kind of anti-scrying measure would be useful."

"Can't say I like the thought of Keepers spying on us," Cathy said and wrapped her arm around the brown-haired man's waist, seeking warmth. She alternated from looking at Snyder and Mercury when she asked "Can it be done?"

"It is not impossible," the redhead said, "Azzathra was able to do it for his temple, but he is a dark god."

"It is strange that the dark gods haven't shared those secrets with their followers yet." Jered scratched his chin, which was starting to

show signs of stubble.

"Maybe they can't see into scrying-protected regions either and therefore don't let their worshippers know how to cast that kind of spell?" Cathy said as she leaned heavier against him. "So, can you come up with something, Mercury?"

"Illusions," Ami replied, already typing away at her computer without touching it. The answer drew confused stares from her companions. Looking up and making her visor disappear, she elaborated "there should be no way to distinguish illusions from reality when seen through a scrying device. There is no sound and no touch, so a spy could be deceived." Her enthusiasm waned a bit with her next sentence. "Unfortunately, I don't know how to work large-scale illusions. My Shabon Spray could work for personal protection, but..."

"It would also make everything cold, humid, and slippery in this environment," Cathy finished for the blue-haired girl, who closed her mouth and decided not to mention other problems, such as sustainability.

"Yes, that too. I will- " Ami paused. "Actually, Snyder and Jadeite, could you please work on that? I will have my hands full with designing rooms and researching the corruption effect."

The acolyte and the dark general exchanged a look. Neither of the two looked too enthused about working together. "Very well."

"What about us?" Cathy asked, nestling up against Jered. Her blue eyes swept over the miniature dungeon, which only consisted of three rooms so far. The dungeon heart chamber, forming the centre of the complex, the treasury holding Ami's modest pile of remaining gold, and the storage room that the group was currently in. The many crates containing the Keeper's books could double as improvised furniture, at least.

Ami seemed taken aback for a moment. "Well, I hadn't really given it much thought yet. Wait, let me try something." Ami waved her right hand, and the group could hear a low tinkle from the treasury as some coins disappeared, and others shifted into the void. A puff of

magic sprang from her fingers, coalescing into a child-sized humanoid. It flopped to the ground, landing on its back with a thud, and stared with dim, lifeless black orbs at the ceiling. A pick fell out of the limp fingers and clattered onto the ice.

"Eh? I thought you were unable to make new imps," Cathy said, looking at the unmoving body on the floor. Its discarded pick rose into the air and flew to Ami's waiting hand.

"The evil spirit that should animate it can't get here from the realms of the dark gods," Ami said, "so I get nothing more than a dead body. Its tools are still magical, though. Here!" She made a step toward Cathy, who took the proffered pickaxe and weighed it in her hand, pouting.

"So we are glorified imps now?" she asked for clarification.

Ami nodded. "In a way. I'm sorry, but I don't have any more interesting tasks at the moment, and it's something that needs to be done."

"Oh well." Cathy shrugged and twirled the tool around in her hand. "I suppose digging will keep me warm at least. A pleasant, heated room had *better* be one of the first things you look into!" Seeing the blue haired girl nod rapidly, the female soldier prodded the dead imp on the ground with the tip of her fur-lined boot. "What about this thing?"

"I'll take it," Jadeite said with a grin, and a long, sturdy fishing pole appeared in his hands. "Let's see if I can't catch us something nice for lunch." Black lines flashed as the dark general disappeared with the corpse.

"Ahem. I don't know if I want to eat anything that would go for *that* kind of bait," Snyder said with a soft shudder, looking at the others, who had similarly queasy expressions on their faces.

Cathy was the first to come to terms with the idea. "Well, I don't know about you, but I'm not exactly in the mood to have chicken for lunch."

Usagi, wearing her school uniform, panted at the top of the stairs leading up to the Hikawa shrine. The black cat on the blonde's shoulder had to hold on tighter when Usagi bent over and steadied herself against her knees, waiting to catch her breath. "Rei! Any news yet?" she shouted upon spotting the raven-haired girl sweeping the court in front of the building with a broom.

The red and white clad shrine maiden shot her friend an annoyed glance as she shook her head. "You were supposed to be here twenty minutes ago!"

"Sorry! Ms. Haruna put me in detention again and I nearly missed lunch and then the bus left just before I could get on!"

"You are such a meatball head," Rei replied, her shoulders drooping as she followed Luna into the living area of the shrine. The moon cat walked past grandpa Hino, who was waving at Usagi with an enthusiastic smile on his face in between selling good-luck charms to shrine visitors.

"I hope Ami is all right," Usagi said when the two girls and one cat were alone. "I'm so worried about her! Can't you do another fire reading to see if she is all right? Pretty please?" the blonde asked before putting her school bag down in front of the low table.

"Usagi, Rei already tried that the day before yesterday. Can't you see how tired she looks?" Luna said, looking at her charge with as much disapproval as her feline face could express.

"But I'm so worried about her!" the blonde wailed, "I can't stand the thought that she's dead!"

Luna just sighed in agreement and sidled up to the schoolgirl, who was sniffing quietly as she sat sitting down on a mat on the floor.

"Quiet! Quick, get your paper out, I'm feeling something!" Rei shouted, prompting the blonde to turn her head so fast that she nearly gave herself whiplash. Luna barely managed to leap out of the way as Usagi leaned over without warning and started rummaging around in her school bag for a pen and a notebook.

"Ow! Paper cut!" the girl held up her index finger and looked at it, blue eyes going round and watery.

"Don't be such a crybaby! It's Ami!"

"She's alive?" Usagi's face lit up like a sunrise. Injuries forgotten, she launched herself at the red-and-white robed shrine maiden and caught her in a hug. "I'm so glad!"

Watching her friends' antics through her scrying ball, Ami smiled. It felt good to see them, even if she couldn't join them. In the tiny vision, a startled Rei squatting on the ground was berating Usagi for her sudden lunge, but her heart wasn't into it, and the two girls quickly dissolved into relieved laughter. Even Luna seemed elated and did a little leap of joy.

However, the impromptu celebration only lasted for a few moments, and then curiosity got the better of the two girls, and they nearly fell over each other in their haste to take their places on the mats around the table. Usagi's was the first to finish writing down a question and held it up for Ami to see. "How are you?"

"I'm fine now. My left hand is in a sling, but it will be healed in about two weeks." The message telegraphed across dimensions forced Rei to pause in her writing as she jotted down dots and lines on her paper. She shoved it over to Usagi for translation and continued writing on her own sheet, scribbling fast. The tip of her tongue protruded from the corner of her mouth as she moved the pen rapidly over the paper. Luna, who had jumped onto the table, wandered over to see what the long-haired shrine maiden was doing.

"WHAT?" The cat's sudden screech made Usagi cringe and look up from her translation. With her tail straight in the air and her fur standing on end, the black feline stared at the offending question and arched her back. "Rei, what is the meaning of this?"

"That's exactly what I'm asking an explanation for!" The long-haired girl said through gritted teeth.

"Huh? What's going on? Let me see!" Despite crowding Rei, Usagi couldn't get a good look at the question that had caused Luna to get all agitated and walk up and down in front of the sheet, shaking her head and muttering to herself. Fortunately, the black-haired girl raised up the paper so that her missing friend could see it in her scrying device.

"What's going on between you and Jadeite? I saw you sleep in the same bed!"

Ami nearly dropped the crystal ball upon reading the question, and blushed beet red. Had she been there in person, she would have avoided looking into her friends' eyes and stared at the ground while stammering in embarrassment. How did Rei even know about this? Possible denials like "It wasn't what it looked like!" and "Nothing happened!" went through the young Keeper's head, but none of them were precise enough to be worth spending the time to transmit.

Usagi's eyes seemed to bug out at getting that information. "Ami? In bed with Jadeite?" The blonde looked incredulously at the shrine maiden. "Rei, how did you know about this? Did you," Usagi flushed, "abuse the fire to spy on them?" "No! It was an accident!" Rei said, blushing too and scowling at the suggestion.

A moment later, Usagi was waving a new sheet around excitedly, making it hard to read. "Ami? Is that true?"

Luna tried in vain to get the blonde's attention, and had to resort to a quick prick with her claws to make the girl take notice of her. Ami could see the cat dictating something, which her friend noted down. The paper read:

"Ami, he's manipulating you! He is a dark general, and has already deceived you into allying with Metallia! You must resist his advances! Don't trust him!"

"Yes, you can't trust those dark generals! Nephrite is trying the same thing with poor Naru!"

A few minutes later, the two girls and one cat sat over Ami's answer,

waiting impatiently for Rei to finish putting the last dots and lines on the paper, while Usagi was already translating the beginning, holding a book with Morse code in his hand.

"Jadeite is not at fault here," the first part read, causing Luna to snarl *It's worse than I thought.*. "I'm afraid at the time, he didn't even know that I," a large delay appeared before the next word, as if Ami was wrestling with herself to pick a proper term, "like him. I needed a lot of comforting at the time, and my magic instinctively retrieved him whenever he tried to get away."

Silence reigned in Rei's room as the others digested the message. "Oh Ami," Luna shook her head, "you were supposed to be the responsible one. She must be under so much pressure."

"I wish I had the power to just draw a boy I liked to me," Usagi said, daydreaming about Tuxedo Mask. No more mysterious vanishing for him!

"Of course, that would be the only way for you to keep a boyfriend," Rei teased.

"Hey!"

"Girls, this is not the time!" Luna interrupted, warding off another brawl before it could start. Rei took the time to compose another message. "How could you fall for JADEITE?" She underlined the words twice on the paper.

"Well, I suppose he is good-looking, even though he's evil," Usagi pondered, seeing the question. "Not as good as Tuxedo Mask of course."

"Usagi, write this down for me," Luna said as she faced her 'owner' and dictated. "Ami, please be cautious. Try to act responsibly and don't do anything you will later regret! Don't let him trick you!"

"Guys? Can we change the topic? I need your help," Ami telegraphed, deeply embarrassed by having her love life, or lack thereof, discussed by her friends.

"Sure. What do you need, Ami?"

"Could you please go to the library and show me some books?" Usagi translated, and her face fell at the thought of spending the afternoon in the stuffy old building.

"What does she need all of this for?" Rei wondered, looking across the stack of books on the table to Usagi, who was sitting sideways on her chair and gazing out of the window. About every two seconds, she turned a page of the open book in front of her that she wasn't even looking at. None of Ami's requested works had all that many pictures in them.

"You can still feel her watching us, right?" the blonde asked, observing the people pass below in the small park in front of the library.

Rei nodded, turning a page of the manual in front of her. "Yes, or she couldn't be recording copies."

A bag on the floor, resting next to one of the book-filled shelves, rustled, and two cat eyes glittered in its unzipped opening. "The electrical engineering and chemistry ones are easy enough to interpret," Luna said, keeping her voice hushed. "She wants to build something, and that world has no modern technology to speak of. I'm not sure what the benefit of the geological and climatological books are, though."

Rei sighed. "I still think Jadeite used some evil mind tricks on her. What do you think, Usagi? Usagi, are you listening?" Before the long-haired girl could get annoyed, she noticed the tense look on the blonde's face. "What's up?"

"I think I just saw Nephrite," the blonde said, not taking her eyes from the window. Both girls quietly looked around the room, finding that they were currently its only occupants.

"Moon Prism Power, Make Up!"

"Mars Power, Make Up!"

"Hold it right there!"

Nephrite, in his guise of Masato Sanjouin, had just struck up a pleasant conversation with his intended victim, and frowned in irritation at the interruption. He hadn't even gotten around to planting his youma yet. The young woman he had been talking to was wearing a yellow hat and matching summer dress, and now looked up at the nearby tree where the voice had come from. On its branches, to the left and right of the trunk, posed two teenagers in very short skirts, one red, one blue.

"Nephrite! The park is a place for people to rest and find romance, not for you to prey on innocent women! I'm the sailor senshi of love and justice, Sailor Moon!"

"And I am Sailor Mars!"

"In the name of the Moon, we will punish you!" the two senshi said together and jumped off their perch, landing in the grass to both sides of the brown-haired man, who glared at them. He walked backward to bring both of them in his field of vision without having to turn his head.

"You dark generals are the worst! Isn't Naru enough for you? And here you are, already hitting on another woman! Tell me, are you copying Jadeite, or did you come up with that plan first?"

Nephrite cocked his head at the mention of his unfortunate predecessor. "Oh? That doesn't sound like any of his plans that I have heard about. Do tell me more," Nephrite said, crossing his arms. He was honestly curious about what half-baked scheme his late colleague had pursued that had riled up the senshi of fire like this. With a hint of annoyance, he noted that his conversation partner had the good sense of fleeing from the soon-to-be battlefield. Maybe he should have tried denying their accusations?

"Don't play so innocent!" Sailor Mars pointed her index finger at the dark general, feeling her temper flare at the smug expression on his face. "He's doing the same thing as you, trying to seduce innocent girls! FIRE SOUL!"

The dark general jumped straight into the air to avoid the roaring fireball that shot from the red-skirted senshi's pressed-together index fingers. He stayed there, hovering and tossing his hair as he smirked at her. *She talks about him in the present? Did Beryl forgive him? The very notion was ridiculous.* "Bah, you are not worth my time, little girls." His floating figure shimmered as he disappeared. A moment later, the two senshi could hear tires squeal as his red sports car sped down the road and vanished into the distance.

Within the cathedral-like interior of Nephrite's mansion, the dark general lifted his chin from his fist and rose from his throne. While he was sure that Sailor Mars had been mistaken, her words left him anxious. What if Jadeite really was back? His position could be in danger. "The stars know everything," he intoned, and the ceiling of his mansion faded into darkness, showing a replica of the night sky. Stars and planets circled on their orbits around a larger sphere at the centre. Nephrite closed his eyes as he focused his astrological powers, and a pencil-thin beam lanced out from the central orb and struck him in the forehead. In the dark general's mind, images flashed past. Jadeite, bowing before a short haired teenage girl with glowing red eyes. Him again, instructing the same young woman. A final image of the dark general, floating in the air over alien, spiny ice, his curly blond hair waving in the wind.

"So Jadeite is free," the long-haired dark general muttered with some surprise as he opened his eyes. Not only free, but also under new employment, if the visions were anything to go by. "Looks as if Queen Beryl is losing her touch. Well, good on him!" Now what should he do with that information?

Jadeite escaped his punishment? Kunzite will want to know about this! Zoisite thought and retreated back into the shadows without revealing himself. His usual round of taunting could wait for now. Who would have thought that spying on his rival would reveal such juicy news? Beryl wouldn't be happy, that was for sure. The youngest of the dark generals giggled as he disappeared in a cloud of flower petals.

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Improving Logistics

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"Don't say a word!" Cathy glared at Jered, threatening him with her pick. The brown-haired man was pressing his hands to his lips, containing a snort that was trying to escape from his inflated cheeks. With an audible hiss, the pent up laughter escaped through his nose instead, and the scar-faced blonde let out a little growl.

"Fine, fine," The brown-eyed man said, raising his hands in a placating gesture, "If it annoys you so much, I'll do the little dance next so you can have a laugh at my expense too."

"It's just so ridiculous," the female soldier said, turning her head with a huff, "but sure. Go right ahead!" She stepped aside, pressing her back against the uneven ice of the freshly hewn-out tunnel. At least it was too cold in here for the ice to melt. Being cold *and* wet was the last thing she needed.

Little splinters of loose ice crunched under the lean man's boot as he moved forward into the unfinished end of the new excavation. "At least it worked. Look!" He pointed at the ground, toward the border between smooth floor tiles and raw ice. Under the pair's gaze, bumps in the ice melted down and pits filled up until the surface was level, turning into more tiles as the border of claimed terrain crept forward.

"Now it's your turn." Cathy crossed her arms and grinned at Jered, who moved to the end of the tunnel with a resigned look.

"Well, let's get started." He took a broad-legged stance in the centre of the hallway as he faced the wall in front of him. Throwing first his left, then his right knee high into the air, he went through the motions of what looked like a jig, waving his arms in the air as his torso swung back and forth. Soon, he heard the giggles of his girlfriend behind him as he continued with the short ritual, which was designed to draw the magic of the dungeon heart through him as his feet stomped it into the ground, solidifying Mercury's claim on the

place. While passably optimised for imp use, the process looked rather ridiculous when performed by a grown human, he thought. Aquamarine-coloured haze rose around his feet as the heart's influence saturated the area and brought it completely into the Keeper's influence. "I could see myself reflected in the wall," the wavy haired man said, grimacing. "I was flinching at the sight the whole time. We need to get Mercury to find us a better way to do this!"

"Oh, but remember that I did have to demonstrate it for you," a voice from the other end of the short tunnel said, startling the two occupants. They turned around in mortification to see Mercury's face peeking around the corner, backlit by the brighter room behind her. She stood in the opening, hiding a light-hearted smile beneath her hand. "But I agree, the procedure looks rather awkward. I think I might be able to design a tool to expand the claim with instead of the dance. A roller, perhaps."

"Mercury! I didn't see you arrive. Are you done consulting your friends for help?" Cathy, who hadn't been the one to do the strange imp-dance when the Keeper arrived, was more amused than embarrassed.

Ami nodded. "Yes, but we were interrupted by one of our enemies." *I wish I had known that he had fled by car, then I could have tracked him back to his base. Too bad that the crystal ball doesn't get sound.* The concept of a dark general using mundane transport like that seemed odd to her, too. Teleportation was so much more convenient, as she had found out. If she didn't pay attention, she'd get fat and lazy from the lack of exercise. Turning her attention back to the half-finished excavation site, she let her gaze wander over the partly-smoothed walls of the new tunnel. The brickwork looked less precise than the one her imps had worked on, but was quite serviceable. Ami's gaze was drawn to the large bas-relief of a spiralling frost pattern that broke up the repetitive rectangles of the ice blocks. The little triangular scales forming it shimmered purplish, in contrast to the more bluish-green tones of the surrounding ice.

"This is very elaborate. I didn't know either of you was artistically inclined," Ami said, amazement swinging in her voice. To her surprise, Cathy and Jered exchanged a confused look at her praise.

"I thought you designed that?" the blonde asked, raising an eyebrow at the younger girl.

"It just appeared there after we smoothed the wall, like the bricks. I take it that isn't working as intended, then?" Jered inspected the glittering decoration more closely. "Seems to be harmless. Kind of pretty even, in a creepy way."

Ami touched her right earring, dismissing the visor through which she had just taken a closer look at the design. "It's not magical. Maybe it's related to the corruption spikes that showed up on the surface? Well, it shouldn't be a problem..." Ami trailed off, hoping that the patterns growing on the walls like strange mildew wouldn't interfere with the functionality she intended to create.

"So, what's planned for the cave we are digging right now?" Cathy asked, swinging her imp-pick at the ice while Jered compared her progress with the floor plan he was holding. A spray of ice shards crumbled away under the impact of the tool, clattering to the ground and dissolving.

"A provisional living area. Chairs, couches, a dining table, a workbench along the wall," Ami said, and continued with a smile at Cathy, who was shivering despite her thick winter clothing. "And heated, once I get the wiring done."

"Well, what are you waiting for? Get to work!" the blonde barked, using the same tone of voice that she had used while drilling Ami for her upcoming duel. The conditioning held, and with a startled squeak, the blue-haired girl snapped to attention and disappeared into a flash of blue.

No shadowy figures were stirring just outside the wide circle of light centred on the Dark Kingdom's throne. Queen Beryl had dismissed her courtiers and was sitting alone on the seat, her face as expressionless as that of the carved monstrous skull dominating the back wall of the room. The dark queen's purplish-blue dress blended in with the organic-looking rock outgrowths that formed her throne, leaving the brooding queen nearly invisible in the shadows. Only her

fiery red hair provided more of a contrast, cascading around her shoulders as she gazed at the staff floating vertically in front of her. A black crystal ball set into its top glowed from within as she moved her hands over it and gazed into its depths.

Soon enough, her lips distorted into a downward curve before she bared her teeth at the sight, revealing two pointy fangs.

The smell of cooked fish permeated the dungeon air, escaping from the recently-added kitchen. Like the living room, it hid the fact that it was hewn out of ice behind a layer of stone bricks that covered every surface. They also covered the electrical cables that powered the stove that dominated the tiny place.

At first, Ami had considered just letting the thick bundle of cables run openly through the corridors, but her natural tidiness and concern for the safety of her companions had convinced her otherwise. Besides, she predicted that she would still be spending some time here, so the gold expense required to clad the walls with an additional layer of stone containing hollows for pipes and cables had been worth it. In fact, it was such an elementary component of all her plans for new rooms that programming it into the dungeon heart had been an obvious first step. The only thing irking her a bit were the strange frost pattern decorations that showed up even on the freshly-created stone. They did provide a certain elegance to the place, but the fact that they appeared without her input was worrisome.

The group of people sitting around the table were displaying various degrees of reluctance in loading their plates with slices cut from the large, steaming slab of meat resting on the central platter.

"I don't know. Shark?" Jered commented, eyeing the morsel impaled on the tip of his fork dubiously.

"It was the first thing that went for the bait," Jadeite said as he cut himself a slice. "A huge one, too. Had to blast it to subdue it. The head alone was this big!" With the pride of a successful fisherman, he spread his arms wide, indicating the size of the body part in question. As he was still holding the knife, Snyder, who was sitting

to his right, jerked backward in fear of being accidentally stabbed, and nearly toppled his chair in the process.

"Now, now. Watch the pointy bits!" the acolyte complained.

"Eat before it gets cold," Cathy chided, already chewing on her own piece and rolling it around on her tongue. The female soldier was sitting closest to the heater, a big rectangle of stone with a slider to regulate temperature. Naturally, it was set to maximum, and she was basking in the heat radiating outward from it which she could feel on her back. "Salty," she commented on the quality of the food, "stringy too."

"Well, excuse me for only working with what I had available," Snyder said. "In any case, there is enough left in the larder to try again later."

Ami cut away at her own portion using her good hand and keeping the piece of shark in place with her telekinetic powers. A brief fantasy of Jadeite helping her by feeding her the pieces flitted through her mind, and she hung her head as her cheeks flushed. *I really have to talk with him about this.* Even if it was only to assuage the fears of her friends. By now, it should have been impossible for him to have missed that she had taken a liking to him, which made working with him feel very awkward. She'd have to bring things out into the open, but the mere thought of that made her palms and forehead feel sweaty and her heart beat faster. If love letters already caused her to panic, how should she deal with something like that?

As she chewed on the unappealing meat, she ignored the banter of the others, eyes still downcast. The blinking glow of the amulet around her bandaged wrist was therefore right in her line of sight. Conversation around the table came to a halt as she sat up and summoned her crystal ball, shoving her helping aside to make room for the scrying device. It was a bit too soon for Rei to be looking in again, she thought, aware of the sudden, tense silence as the others watched her movements. She focused on finding whoever was seeing her, and immediately, the clouds within the clear orb fractured into a multitude of perspectives. In all but one of them, she recognised the brightly-lit greyish tones of this room. She focused on promoting the one remaining view into taking up the whole sphere,

and immediately felt the heavier drain on her magic that indicated that she was bridging the distance between dimensions. Her friends, then? Happy that she wasn't being spied on by an enemy Keeper, she was rather surprised to see an unfamiliar woman with long, crimson hair and orange eyes. Two horns jutting from her shoulders revealed, together with pointed ears and small fangs gleaming between deep red lips, that the observer was not completely human.

Jadeite, who was leaning in like the others to get a better look, gasped as soon as he made out the distinctive boomerang-shaped black tiara crowning his former queen's head. "Beryl!"

Ami took her eyes off of the scrying device for a moment, watching his face. Pale from the initial surprise, his expression soon turned into a smug grin that looked rather malicious on his angular features, and he waved at the air mockingly with a white-gloved hand. His other hand, hidden underneath the table, was balling into a fist. In reaction, Beryl - *That's the queen of the Dark Kingdom? Why is* she *watching us?* - gritted her teeth and frowned.

"Shabon Spray!" Mercury put an end to Beryl's observation with a spray of bubbles that immediately filled the chamber with rolling fog. The evil queen's scowl deepened as her own crystal ball suddenly showed nothing but greyish-white, and Ami could see the redhead lean back and put her hands on the armrests of her throne as she started thinking.

"Oh great. Now the food is cold," Cathy said from within the cold cloud.

"Beryl has found out that I am still alive. This could be a problem, Mercury," Jadeite said, catching the blue-haired girl's gaze with her own.

"How so? Can she control you in some way?" Ami's worried tone reflected her concern for the curly-haired blond's well-being.

"No, I'm more worried that she will try to interfere. She can be vindictive that way," the dark general said, grimacing at the thought. "If she finds out how to reach this world, she might even send youma after us. While I can deal with them individually easily

enough, you probably know already that they can be more dangerous than even the vampires we encountered a short while ago."

Ami sighed and poked at the shark meat in front of her. "We will just have to deal with it as best as we can if it happens." She perked up and smiled with determination, making her eyes flash red as she continued "but if she does, we will use the opportunity to learn the way back home from the intruders!"

Beryl, in the seclusion of her throne room, let out a growl of anger. The information she had been given was right. Jadeite was free. That should have been impossible. Nobody could escape the Eternal Sleep under their own power! He must have had outside help. Maybe that red-eyed sorceress? She was skilled, Beryl admitted, to be able to detect her scrying so rapidly. Who was she, and what did she want with her failure of a general? And how had she known where to find him? And, most importantly, what was Jadeite up to now? This entire debacle reeked of treason. If only Queen Metallia was awake! Something about the spell that the little red-eyed girl had used to hide from her view nagged at the back of her mind, but she couldn't quite remember what it was. Fingers with long nails clawed at the stone of the armrest as Beryl's eyes gleamed dangerously. "How dare he defy me? ZOISITE! Appear before me!"

With barely any delay, a swirl of flower petals materialised in the air, revealing the hovering form of the long-haired dark general. He floated gently to the ground and inclined his head. "My Queen?" A faint smile played around the man's lips as he noted the unusually empty surroundings. A secret mission for him? He could already imagine what this would be about.

"Zoisite. I have verified your information. I want you to question the youma of Jadeite's division and find out what they know. Get to it."

"Queen Beryl, I think it would be beneficial to interrogate Nephrite too," Zoisite said, taking a calculated risk.

Beryl's eyes narrowed. "Explain."

The effeminate-looking dark general straightened. "I know for a fact that he knows about Jadeite's escape. Yet he has not approached you about this, has he?" Zoisite carefully gauged Beryl's reaction. She cocked her head and shifted her weight forward, but did not contradict him. So he *had* predicted his colleague's reaction, or lack thereof, accurately, and dared continue "Well, he isn't doing so well with collecting energy for our Great Ruler either, despite facing only two senshi. Maybe he doesn't *want* to succeed? It might be wise to replace-"

"No." Beryl's eyes were near-closed now. "Do as you were told."

"Very well." Zoisite bowed, the motion hiding his pout.

"My, she has been busy," Cathy said as she wiped the sweat from her brow and rested her pick on her right shoulder. She walked past a window carved entirely from polished ice and looked out onto the iceberg's spiny surface. The bare ground, bereft of its snow cover by the constant storm that howled across it, reflected the black thunderclouds racing across the sky. Whenever lightning flashed, the entire area lit up blindingly bright, casting the constructions outside into stark relief. The swordswoman easily recognised the windmills built of solid stone and anchored deeply in the ice for what they were, but the newest construction closest to the window left her puzzled. "I wonder what that strange tower on metal stilts is for?" The woman opened the door leading to the bridge that spanned the short distance between the iceberg's hill and the new building, from whose top steam rose. Icicles hung like stalactites from the hollow tube made of ice that clinked with every step she took. They were met on the ground by stalagmites, and together, they made the whole arching bridge resemble a giant, fanged maw.

"Mercury? What are you doing?" the blonde asked, pulling the metal door behind her with a squeak as she surveyed the room. It was small, but well-heated, and she found the younger girl sitting on a chair, with a C-shaped desk around her. The piece of furniture stood in front of an internal window and bristled with strange levers and

cranks, which the young Keeper adjusted from time to time.

Ami answered without looking up from her computer. "Basically, this is a kind of furnace. I didn't want to build it underground because I don't believe that walls of ice, even if they are fortified dungeon walls, could survive that kind of temperature."

"Makes sense," Cathy nodded and stepped closer, which allowed her to see a large upright cylinder through the glass, resting in the room below. A red-glowing spiral wound around it, and she could see turning cogs, like the ones found in a giant clock, powered by weighs that lowered slowly as they turned the upper part of the opaque cylinder. "What is it for?"

"I'm trying to provide us with an income," Ami said. "First, I tried simply conjuring gold with my fabrication spell, but the dungeon heart didn't accept it as the real thing. If we are limited to using mined gold, we will run out eventually, and then it's going to be the Avatar Isles all over again." The blue-haired girl shuddered a bit at the thought. "Even gold from trade would run out after some time. I'm not surprised that most Keepers are using organic dungeon hearts." She took a look through her visor, frowned, and fiddled with a lever, glancing back at the heated cylinder from time to time until she was satisfied.

"So what you doing about it?" Cathy asked, sounding more impatient at the lack of an explanation.

"I'm trying to grow some gems the non-magical way," the young Keeper replied, causing the blonde standing beside her to raise her eyebrows.

"Wait, what? Grow gems? You mean like plants? How does that work?"

"By simulating the conditions under which gems naturally form. In my world, the process I'm using here has been around for about half a century, but it's not easy to replicate. To put it simply, if you melt down the substances that constitute a gem, keep them pure and at just the right temperature, and then suspend an already existing seed gem into the raw materials, the gem will grow slowly." She

pointed at the clockwork. "This mechanism is turning the top part of the cylinder, raising it into the ceiling at a constant speed, and lifting the seed crystal hanging from it as it moves. The tricky part is keeping the temperature just right, which is why I am personally overseeing the process."

"And that works?" Cathy sounded dubious.

"I hope so. I have the advantage that I'm working with higher purity base materials than we have on my world, as we lack the magic to just synthesize substances from gold. However, I can't be sure that my makeshift apparatus is going to work."

"What are you growing, anyway?"

"Sapphires. I crushed the one in my tiara into splinters to use as seeds," the blue-haired girl said as she adjusted the temperature controls. "While it's conjured, everything that grows from it should be real."

Cathy watched the moving parts of the furnace slowly turn around their own axis, and got bored of it rapidly. "Sooo, how long will this take?"

"At least two more hours. I'm afraid it wont get any more interesting than this," Ami answered, returning her attention to her computer.

The tension in the treasury could almost be cut with a knife. Ami and her companions were standing along the walls of the place, looking at the black and white chequerboard pattern of the ground. Only a handful of gold bags remained in the corner of the room, as recent infrastructure construction had made quite the dent in the senshi's finances. It was still more money than Ami had ever seen in one place in her own world, but not enough for a Keeper's war chest. Constructing the furnace had been particularly pricey. Thus, she was anticipating the result of her experiment with trepidation. She couldn't even put her hands together in front of herself like she wanted to, because her left arm was still in a sling.

"All right, I'm going to retrieve the results from the furnace now," she announced and focused on seeing the interior of the crucible with her Keeper sight. Her face fell at what she found. Only four of the splinters, arranged in a ten-by-ten grid, had expanded in size and length. The others were gone, dissolved by the heat. With a sigh, she plucked the four unappealing-looking cones of blue crystal from their sockets and transported the still hot gems onto the floor in front of her. As soon as the round objects touched the chequered ground, they cracked and shattered, causing Ami to jump back in fright and mutter "Darn it!" as she watched the small piles of gleaming shards scatter and roll apart.

"Wait, I think it worked!" Jered shouted over the tinkling noises. "Look how they glitter and sparkle!"

In the same way that the treasury transformed sufficiently pure raw gold into minted coins, it had reacted to the presence of the bars of synthetic sapphire by splitting them up into smaller, cut gems, Ami now realised, and her expression brightened.

Quick like a magpie, the wavy-haired man knelt down and picked up one of the pea-sized, multifaceted jewels. "Not a flaw that I can make out with the bare eye," he said as he inspected the blue gem from all angles. These things must be worth a fortune!"

"Whoo-hoo! That means we are back in business!" Cathy rejoiced. She patted Mercury, who was now smiling brightly, on the back, startling the smaller girl and making her take a step forward in order to maintain her balance. "So, I take it you have some spare cash to start working on proper bedrooms now?" She said with a wink.

Ami nodded happily - at least until Jered winked too and said "and if you want to cut down on the costs, you can just room with Jadeite over there,"

"Jered!" his girlfriend chided, putting her arms akimbo. Ami went red like a tomato and looked at the curly-haired blond out of the corner of her eyes. Gods, he was looking back. The talk she dreaded was becoming more and more inevitable.

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An Awkward Talk

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Ami sat on the edge of her bed, admiring her new bedroom. A telekinetic shove pushed the slider on the heater to a higher setting as she doffed the heavy winter garments and pelts necessary to survive on the iceberg. Underneath, she was wearing one of her black Keeper outfits, which, while imposing-looking, didn't provide much protection from the elements. Having electricity again sure felt nice. Overhead, the lamp hanging from the ceiling flickered as the currents fluctuated. With a wry smile, Ami looked up at the glass hemisphere. The locals had been impressed by the simplicity of just having to push a button to turn the light on and off, no magical knowledge required. Re-inventing the light bulb had been easy, fortunately. Not so simple was maintaining a high-quality, failure-free power grid, the repeated waxing and waning of the illumination reminded her, even if the dungeon heart's magic kept her rooms solid and frozen, despite the room temperature. Maybe she should try designing and creating a transformer next? More stable current would potentially improve the gem creation process too. At least the cables hidden in the artificial stone walls were well-made and up to handling even a large increase in capacity.

Ami shifted her weight, making the springs in the mattress creak as she leaned forward, and frowned at the wallpaper. It should have been white and pristine like freshly-fallen snow. Instead, light blue frost patterns marred its surface. Not that the spidery spirals, which reminded the blue-haired girl of hurricanes watched from orbit, were ugly. They just shouldn't be there, and Ami worried about what would happen if they started showing up on delicate machinery. It was reassuring that the decorations left the furniture alone, for now. The teenager winced inwardly at the sight of the wooden closet standing next to her desk in the left corner of her room and half-covering one of the strange marks. The furniture was simple and functional, but she had designed it in a hurry, with no regard for aesthetics. Some adornments distracting from their rough and boxy look would actually have been an improvement. The muscles

around her eyes tightened, turning her expression into one of determination, and she stood up from the bed and walked over the soft, aquamarine carpet toward the wall. *Let's see if I can't erase those things.*

Stopping in front of the largest filigree pattern, she touched it with her fingertips and focused on the fabrication spell. Discs of white expanded from the points of contact, until all of the unwanted adornments were covered up. Ami took a step back and inspected the drying paint for any trace of blue, but found none. Satisfied, she turned away, pondering whether or not she should remove the other decorations, too. The wall did look a bit empty without them, she admitted as she glanced back at the blank space. Her eyes widened and glowed redder when she noted that the pattern was back. Even staring at the thing through her visor revealed no external influence. It seemed that her new dungeon heart was a bit of a graffiti artist, then? Not one to give up easily, Ami decided to take a different approach. A repeated application of her magic painted a fake window onto the wallpaper, covering the frost pattern with a view of a few stylised trees. Her work complete, the young Keeper backed away from her painting, not taking her eyes off of it, and sat down on her bed again. Minutes passed, with only the faint rumbling of the dungeon heart in the background to keep her company. Tired, Ami yawned, closing her eyes. When she reopened them, the trees in the painting looked warped and skeletal, and the patterns were back, wrapping like vines around the painted window's frame. Creepy.

Feeling the hairs on the back of her neck rise, Ami decided that she would have to research this phenomenon properly another day. With recording equipment in place. However, it was about time that she caught up on some sleep. Her hand went to the gold buttons around her collar, but hesitated. This would be the first night following her encounter with Azzathra and the Reaper duel that she would be going to bed without artificial aids to fall asleep. With all the fairy excitement and her research work, she hadn't had the time to dwell on her experiences properly yet - not that she wanted to. But now, she feared that her unoccupied mind would prod and poke at the memories, and they would nag at her from within, preventing her from getting a moment of rest. Or, even worse, she would fall

asleep, have horrible nightmares, and summon Jadeite to her room again. That would be absolutely mortifying. Ami felt her face flush at the thought, even if a treacherous part of her mind insisted that cuddling with the attractive dark general was just what she needed. What was he wearing to bed, anyway? Some of the possibilities, especially combined with her transporting him again, left her blushing harder and convinced her that she should have a chat with him right now, if only to head off even worse future embarrassment. A guilty little glance into his room revealed that he had not gotten ready for bed.

The knocking noise of Ami's knuckles hitting wood echoed through the corridor, and she cringed inwardly at the realisation that it was too late to back out of the talk now. "Jadeite? It's me," she announced herself.

"Come in." The door swung open on its own, and Ami spotted the dark general getting up from his chair and turning in her direction. Gathering up her courage, she stepped over the threshold. She was being silly for hesitating so much, the logical part of her mind chided her. If she could face monsters without weapons, then having a talk with Jadeite, where she risked nothing but embarrassment, should be easy. Her heart, which was beating rapidly in her chest, disagreed. *Of course, now I'm alone with him in his bedroom.* Banishing that though to the back of her mind with a supreme effort of will, Ami took a step forward. After all, she had a good reason to be here. She raised her gaze from the floor and looked at Jadeite's face, and he returned the look with a calculating expression in his eyes.

"Mercury," he offered as a greeting, inclining his head nearly imperceptibly. "What brings you here?"

"Um," Ami stammered, having no idea of how to begin. *No, stop looking at the ground, you aren't doing anything wrong here!* "It occurred to me that I had not properly apologised for my treatment of you the night before the duel yet," she said, "So, um, I'm very sorry to have kept you up like that all night! I didn't mean to!" With a deep blush, she bowed and wished she could clasp both hands

together, but the sling prevented that. Where should she put the other hand in such a situation, anyway?

"No harm done," Jadeite granted magnanimously, revealing white teeth as his lips parted in a polite smile, "your distress at the situation was understandable."

Ami fidgeted under his gaze. "I wish I could promise you that it won't happen again," she said in a low voice, looking at the floor and feeling her cheeks heat up, "but I don't know what will happen if I have nightmares. Just- just wake me if you end up with me again, okay?" With her face burning, she whirled around and made for the door.

"Wait!"

Jadeite's unexpected request made her freeze in mid-step, and she looked back over her shoulder at the curly-haired blond.

"I do have a question. It's something that has been confusing me for a while now, if you don't mind me asking."

Ami turned half around so she could see him better. "Yes?"

Jadeite took a step forward and raised a white-gloved hand, pointing at himself. "Why - me? If you needed comforting, I would have thought you would summon someone more motherly, like Cathy. Or at least someone less threatening, like the priest." He paused, not even noticing how Mercury's pupils shrunk in alarm at that question, and added "After all, I had the impression you were cross with me for some reason, the way you were avoiding me."

"What? N-no!" Ami found out that trying to hide one's face in one's palms when looking at the ground was quite difficult with only one free hand. Barely audible, she said "I'm just timid."

"Timid? But why? This explains nothing!"

Ami heard the blood thumping in her veins so loudly that it was nearly deafening. He was going to make her say it wasn't he? The urge to flee was becoming nearly irresistible. What would Usagi do in a situation like this? Not run away, Ami was certain of that. And

she owed him an explanation, didn't she? The teenager opened her eyes and looked up, trembling slightly as she met Jadeite's gaze. "I think I may be in love with you," she breathed. There, now it was out in the open! With great anxiety and a glimmer of hope in her heart, she observed the dark general's face as she waited for his answer with bated breath.

While Jadeite had vaguely considered the possibility, he had not given it much credence. Oh, sure, he knew he was good-looking, but she was a sailor senshi! They had been mortal enemies not so long before. Cathy's mocking voice *She likes you too much* echoed in his memory, taunting him. The muscles around Jadeite's mouth twitched as if he wanted to say something, but decided otherwise and thought some more. He took a deep breath and said "No, I don't understand." His tone of voice was as perplexed as the expression in his eyes. "That doesn't make sense. You are acting all wrong!"

"Uh," now it was Ami's turn to blink in confusion "What would you have been expecting?" The urge to sink into the ground abated slightly when the dark general's answer roused her curiosity.

Her question forced Jadeite to pause. What would he have expected? Love in the Dark Kingdom was uncommon, and he had few examples to draw upon. There were Kunzite and Zoisite, who had a stable long-term relationship going, but kept it fairly private. Not that he had ever felt like investigating what exactly it was that the two did when they were alone. Not that he had ever believed that the entire situation was anything but Kunzite being attracted by the younger general, who shamelessly took advantage of this infatuation and milked it for all it was worth. This would have been the smart thing to do. Another, more personal example was Thetis. The youma had been pursuing him quite insistingly for a while, but he had rejected her irritating advances. Why in Metallia's name would he want to let her into his life and make himself vulnerable? With a hint of amusement, he noted that she had the same power set and hair colour than the girl standing in his room with a face as red as a tomato. Was there something about him that made him irresistible to blue-haired girls who controlled water? Oh, right, she was still waiting for an answer, looking at him with large, shiny eyes. Their red glow looked subdued right now, allowing their naturally

blue colour to shimmer through. It was also an uncomfortable reminder that she still held the power here.

"More aggressiveness," he said, managing to pin down the most important aspect of Mercury's behaviour that had he felt had been missing. "If you were interested, why did you not act on it?"

"That would have been wrong," Ami exclaimed with conviction. Less vehemently, she elaborated "You are my employee. I didn't want to make you feel pressured, or jeopardize our working relationship. I didn't want to force you into something you wouldn't like." *And I was too shy.*

While Jadeite could appreciate the sentiment - he certainly wouldn't have wanted to become the object of Beryl's obsession - it also ran counter to his mode of thinking. "What else is power for, if not to take what you want?"

Ami shook her head sadly. "That's not how love works. It's something that can only be given, not taken."

"What a strange perspective," the dark general said, crossing his arms.

Ami felt that he was not getting it. "If you love someone, you want them to be happy, even if it comes at the cost of your own unhappiness."

"That's not how things were done in the Dark Kingdom," Jadeite said. Upon seeing Mercury's dejected look, he thought about her words. The very concept was ridiculous, typical girly nonsense, but... He remembered the battle on the Avatar Islands, the pain of sharp fangs tearing into his neck, and the desperate worry in Mercury's eyes as she saved him, fleeing the battle just to carry him to safety. Could this have been more than just the desire to preserve her most valuable resource? Could she have done this out of caring for him personally? The curly-haired blonde felt an unfamiliar emotion. The idea of having someone who would look out for you and whom you could trust was oddly compelling. His angular features softened. "But I think I might like your way better."

His answer was rewarded by a radiant smile blossoming on the smaller girl's face, and she took a step toward him before remembering what she was doing. "So. Where does that leave us?" she murmured.

Awkward silence ensued as Jadeite rapidly reassessed his situation. There was so much he had to consider, not at least what his own feelings on the matter were. Apparently, he waited too long.

"I see." Ami's head drooped. "I- I probably should have expected this. It's not as if someone like you would find a bookish little girl like me attractive. I shouldn't have brought this up."

While Jadeite might not have been the most well-educated person in matters of love, he was certainly smart enough to recognise a verbal minefield. He was also in a rather qualified position to judge Mercury's attractiveness, now that he thought about it. The Reaper outfit she had been wearing during the duel had left very, very little to the imagination. There had been nothing objectionable about her curves that he had been able to make out, despite the blood, grime, and bruises that had covered the girl's fit body. Give her a few years to mature, and...

Ami looked up, startled when a large, white-gloved hand enveloped her own.

"I didn't mean to imply anything," Jadeite said with a reassuring smile. "Your question just surprised me. I'm sure you are going to grow up into a beautiful woman."

"Oh." Ami blinked rapidly, her eyes shining wetly as she dared to meet his gaze again. "Um..."

"However, this comes as a surprise to me. Would you mind giving me some time to sort out my thoughts? Let's take things slowly for now."

"Yes. Of course." Ami stammered. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have dropped this on you so suddenly. I didn't really intend to say anything at all." Her blush returned in full force, or maybe it had never left. "I'll leave you, then. Good night!"

"Good night."

Ami all but sprinted from the room. She still couldn't quite believe that she had actually confessed her love to Jadeite. *And he hasn't outright rejected me!* Remembering the warmth of his hand on hers, she pressed the limb to her chest. Somehow, she was less worried about nightmares plaguing her during the night now.

"Hey Mercury, why are you in the kitchen, killing plants?" Jered leaned against the door frame and stared at the burnt clay pots taking up most of the table. All of them contained earth and plants that looked like a random assortment of common weeds to him. They stood in two separate groups, the larger of which contained green and healthy sprouts, while the other contained nothing but dessicated husks.

"I am experimenting," Ami replied as she took a pot from the healthy group and positioned it in front of her chair. "I don't know about you, but I am not looking forward to just eating chicken or fish every day. Besides, that's not healthy, so I'm now investigating a way to rapidly grow plants underground." She frowned when another of the sprouts shrivelled up as she poked it with a black-glowing finger, and made a note on the Mercury computer resting to her right.

Attracted by the voices, Snyder and Cathy appeared, forcing Jered to step out of the doorway. "Ahem, not that I want to criticise your methodology, but if my education does not completely mislead me, you are using a necromantic withering spell on that plant. With very predictable results," the redhead pointed out.

"Yes, and you are giving them too much water, too," Jered said, indicating the layer of liquid above the earth from which the greens were protruding.

"I know that," Ami said, "the interesting thing about the withering spell is that it doesn't actually kill the plant."

"They look pretty dead to me," Cathy quipped with a second look at the grey, limp-leafed remains of Mercury's earlier experiments. In a

suddenly worried tone of voice, she added "Necromancy is an - interesting - choice for a harvest-enhancing spell. You aren't trying to create undead crops or something, are you?"

To the blonde's discomfort, Ami's expression turned thoughtful, as if she was giving that idea some serious consideration. A moment later, her features relaxed and she shook her head. "What I meant is that the cause of death for the plant isn't magic, it's starvation. The spell speeds up the organism's metabolism and supercharges its cells, causing them to divide at a vastly accelerated rate, but the influx of nutrients from the environment remains the same." Upon seeing the confused looks her explanation had earned her, she shifted mental gears and put it into words that Usagi would have understood, too. "The spell makes the plant age rapidly, but it doesn't get enough food to fuel its growth, so it dies."

"Oh, I see. So now you are trying to figure out a way to provide it with what it needs?" Jered said, grasping the concept easily.

Ami nodded. "Yes, and trying to shorten the spell's duration so the harvest won't spoil near-instantaneously. Or maybe to slow the growth rate so that the magic can be manually dispelled."

Cathy straightened and leaned against the wall, crossing her arms. "Interesting. Do you have any work for us to do in the meanwhile?"

"Well, I could use another room for a farm when I have figured out how to make this work," the blue-haired girl said, "Jadeite is already out getting me new plants, so there's nothing I really need at the moment."

"You could teach us how to use the sapphire-making machine," Jered suggested in a hopeful tone of voice.

Ami looked up from her work. "That's a rather complicated process, and you wouldn't be able to check the proper temperature in the first place without-" she hesitated and swivelled her head toward Cathy, who raised an eyebrow at the sudden stare. "Could you press your right earring, please? The one you got from my transformation sequence?"

The blonde complied, and was startled to feel something slide in front of her eyes. Numbers, letters and diagrams that did not make much sense to her flickered across her blue-tinted field of vision.

"I can't say glasses suit you," the woman's wavy-haired boyfriend said with a smile that took the sting out of the words. Mercury's visor on the face of the long-haired blonde looked just so wrong.

The corners of Ami's mouth bent upwards. "It looks as if you *do* have a way to measure the temperature in the crucible. That's the largest hurdle out of the way. I *can* just melt the raw materials again if the experiment doesn't work out properly, and electricity is free," Ami said, staring into the air as she considered the idea. "Yes, I agree. Even if you fail, there is nothing lost, as the furnace would be idling anyway. Come with me, I'll show you how the controls work."

Half a day later and two sapphires richer, Ami presented her newest development to the other four inhabitants of the dungeon. The incubator resembled a free-standing, rectangular safe about as tall as the studious Keeper. Its interior drew curious looks from Ami's companions, as did the heavy cables and gurgling pipes connecting with its sides. A single potted plant stood in the bottom depression of the oven-like device, half-submerged in water, and directly underneath a large lens affixed below the array of light bulbs that hung from the incubator's ceiling.

"As you can see, this turned out to be quite a bit more complicated than I first expected," Ami said as she put her right hand on the open door of her invention and slammed it shut. At the push of a button, fans set into the sides of the device started up, and papers on the nearby table rustled in the wind. Something began sizzling within the device, and a thick cloud of hot steam billowed out from the fan's opening, causing the blue-haired girl to jump back and retreat several metres, until she stood within the group of onlookers.

"Is it supposed to do that?" Cathy asked. "It sounds like a boiling kettle!" By now, the room was as foggy as if Mercury had cast a Shabon Spray Freezing, though the water vapour was pleasantly warm for a change.

Ami nodded, then realised that the others probably couldn't see her in the murk, and said "Working as intended. I think that's long enough to see some results already." She hit the off-switch telekinetically, and the sound of the fans died down, giving way to the crackling noises of cooling metal. Slowly, the door swung open, and the device belched out a new cloud of vapour. "Don't worry, the plant should be fine. There is a fire-immunity spell on it."

Ami gestured, and the still hot pot appeared in front of her, where it remained floating in the air. "Well, what do you think?"

"It does indeed look bigger than before," Jadeite said, giving the green sprout, which had grown by nearly a thumb's length, a once over.

"That seems like an awful lot of spectacle for the result we are getting," Jered said, eyeing the plant suspiciously, "and it's not even fully-grown yet."

"Ah, yes," Ami answered, unperturbed by the criticism, "that would be because of the main problem. Providing the plant with enough water through pipes was simple, as was fanning in fresh air. Giving it enough light was the main problem. If the plant grows twice as fast as normal, it needs twice as much light. If it grows ten times faster, it needs so much light that its intensity would set it on fire, hence the fire immunity spell. The lens in there is for focusing the light of all of these lamps properly on the growing plant, and I also had to figure in rest cycles. Once I had that down, the only thing that remained to do was fiddling with the numbers."

"Ahem, I have a question," Snyder spoke up. "Why can't you just let the plants grow the proper way? If you can have enough light and heating underground to keep them alive, then you could grow them all year round. Why complicate things with necromancy?" The red-and-white robed acolyte seemed honestly puzzled.

"I predict that at least pest control will be much easier her way," Cathy grinned with a look at the steaming incubator.

"I can't afford the time to wait for regular crops when I have to feed an army," Ami explained, "but there is also the space issue. Fields

take up a lot of room, and I can't just dig wherever I want, due to stability concerns. The entire area could just cave in!" Upon seeing Cathy's alarmed expression, she quickly added "don't worry, you are in no danger of that when you are mining out rooms. The dungeon heart won't let you dig out anything that would compromise the dungeon's integrity. The magic of your picks would simply fail."

"That's a relief. So what are you planning to do now that you can make plants grow faster?"

"I'm going to design a farming room, of course." Ami set down the plant next to her boots and summoned her computer. "Let's see. If each plant has a designated spot, then the watering can be handled automatically. The dungeon heart should have no problem synthesizing fertiliser - or should I use sewage? - and with enough electricity... hmm..." unseen fingers clattered over the keyboard as the teenager adjusted her plans. "Many plants need around seventy days to mature, so if I sped up their growth, by a factor of twenty, we should be able to have a harvest around bi-weekly." With her eyebrows forming two happy arcs, she looked at her companions, who seemed suitably impressed, except for Jered.

"I guess at that point, we are really going to start missing the convenience of having imps around," he muttered, putting his hands into his trouser pockets.

"Well, well, I do hope we will be able to delegate harvesting to other minions," Snyder said, mirroring the green-shirted man's expression. "However, I think that using this kind of room for simple farming is letting it go to waste."

Interested, Ami looked up to see what the acolyte had to suggest. "Go on?"

"You can control the climate within these chambers, can you not? You should grow valuable exotic fruits and spices in there, and trade for the more common grub. I would expect this to be a much more efficient use of your resources. At the very least, having delicious food around would raise morale."

"An entirely selfless suggestion," Cathy said with a wink at the

acolyte, who had lost much of his portliness over the recent weeks.

"Transport would be a problem," Jadeite pointed out. "Even if we could find someone willing to trade with us, we would also need to find an untraceable way to move large quantities of cargo quickly. I maintain that farming for our own food is the better option."

Directing a shy smile at the dark general, Ami agreed. "Yes, self-sufficiency should be our primary goal. However, I don't see any problem with growing different crops in additional rooms. Now, does anyone know where we could acquire seeds?"

Last edited: Sep 3, 2016

Planning Session

Originally on 2010-03-15T01:55:00

Feeling that the living room should remain a place for rest and relaxation, Ami had built a separate war room for her strategic planning. It didn't differ much from the former, holding just a central round table with five chairs around it. In a nod to aesthetics, Ami had constructed a fake fireplace around the heater, which helped give the small chamber a cosier feel. Instead of wallpaper, a huge world map covered the left wall, and the middle one was hidden by a blank white screen. On the right stood shelves for paper and books, empty except for a floor plan of the dungeon. The accounting book normally located there was lying open in front of Jered, who had a pencil in his hand. He was ignoring it in favour of staring with fascination at the small, electrically powered projector that Mercury had just deposited onto the centre of the table. Once plugged in, a light in its bottom shone through a transparent sheet of paper located above it, and a mirror reflected the image onto the screen on the wall, enlarged and visible for everyone.

"As you can see, these are my current long-term goals," Ami said, taking position to the left of the projection as she addressed her companions seated around the table. The white sling holding her left arm formed a sharp contrast to the black of her suit-like outfit, and a stick floated next to her, pointing at each of the three statements preceded by bullet points for a short moment.

"Get your soul back, get home, destroy the other Keepers," Cathy summarised aloud. "You aren't thinking small."

"Are these listed in order of priority?" Jered wanted to know.

Ami answered with a light shrug. "They are all important to me. Emotionally, I would rate getting home the most urgent, but not owning my own soul has the most terrifying implications. And, logically speaking, destroying the other Keepers is the most pressing of the three, because they are out there, hurting people

even now."

"It appears to me that finding a way home would also give you physical access to Metallia," Snyder said. "If she really is as weak right now as Jadeite reported, you might be able to coerce her into releasing your soul, provided that you obtain some power that could threaten a dark god."

"Threaten Queen Metallia? Hah! You have no idea what you are talking about, acolyte." Jadeite said, crossing his arms and shooting the white-and-red robed man a sour look. "She has Queen Beryl and all the forces of the Dark Kingdom to protect her. Getting into her good graces would be far wiser. The Great Ruler's power is insurmountable."

"Which is, of course, why she is in a comatose state right now, relying on others to scavenge energy for her so she can subsist like a leech," the priest-in-training taunted back with a triumphant smile.

"Why, you-" Jadeite balled his fists and glowered at the much shorter man sitting across from him.

Ami raised her right hand pleading for silence. "Jadeite, Snyder, please! Let's keep this discussion civil." Looking at the redhead questioningly, she asked "Do you know of anything that would be effective against a dark god?"

"Well, not directly," the redhead admitted, "the Light could do it, naturally, but channelling its power directly does not seem an option that is open to you. If there is lore that would allow someone to do so indirectly, it has not come to my attention yet."

"The Avatar was the Light's most favoured hero," Cathy said while gesturing at the red and black continent on the map, "maybe some of his knowledge is still present on the Avatar Islands?"

"That would depend on how thorough the Keepers were in searching for those kinds of secrets and destroying them," Jered said. "Given the sheer size of the continent, and the quality of their hired help, it's not impossible that some hidden caches yet remain." The green-shirted man leaned back in his chair, "Of course, the

starvation hitting after resources ran out might have been a great motivator for their troops to find what treasures were still left."

"I don't think they would have outright destroyed such things if they found them. It always pays to have some insurance around to keep their patrons honest," Jadeite said, his steel blue eyes narrowing.

"It stands to reason that great heroes of the lands have also learned the best ways to defeat the Darkness," Snyder said, "and of course, there are the various monastic orders." He scratched his chin. "Or maybe the Shining Concord Empire on the southern continent would be able to help. Rumour has it that its lands are protected by powerful white magic and remain untainted by Keeper attacks to this day."

Ami stepped over to the map and looked at the elongated shape of the southern lands, of which only parts of the coast were outlined in any detail. "The ship I encountered was from there," she reminded her companions. "They would have been very successful in stopping me if I had been in a living body at the time."

"They are also infuriatingly secretive and isolationist," Cathy pointed out. "I don't think they would be interested in sharing their secrets, particularly not with us."

"It seems we missed an opportunity when we didn't interrogate those fairies," Jadeite said. "They can't have gotten far yet. I should be able to recapture them, if you wish?"

"Jadeite, that's-" Ami's eyes flashed brighter, and she frowned at him in disapproval. However, her features softened as she gave the suggestion more thought. "The Shining Concord Empire is isolationist, you say?" she asked Cathy, and the scar-faced blonde nodded. "The fairies won't be able to easily make their way home, then?"

The woman nodded again. "There is very little trade between the continents."

"So I put them into a situation similar to my own." The blue-haired girl looked at the ground and sighed. "All right, I owe it to them to

help them get back to their own people. Jadeite, you have my permission to find them, but only after we have secured a second base of operations. And don't harm them, they have suffered enough already!"

"As you wish." The dark general inclined his head and smirked in satisfaction. Not that he expected to get anything useful out of those girls, but having a suggestion approved was always a good thing.

Ami closed that tangent and moved on to the next objective. "All right. Getting me back to my own world, then. Any suggestions?" She looked at the faces of her advisers, hoping that one might have an answer.

"I have not been able to open a portal to the Dark Kingdom yet," Jadeite reported, "all of them ended up connecting either to the Underworld or to chaotic nothingness."

"Don't look at me, I'm a fighter, not a wizard," Cathy said, rolling her eyes.

"Most major cities do have a Wizard's College," Jered pointed out. The weasel-featured man adjusted the dagger-filled bandoleer that was pressing uncomfortably into his shoulder as he strained to keep Mercury, who was standing nearly directly behind him, in his sight. "That's where most of the more exotic research takes place. Of course, with you being a Keeper, you'd have to trick them in order to get anything of use out of them."

"Or simply conquer them," Jadeite suggested.

"That might work too," Jered conceded, "but I wouldn't put it past them to destroy their knowledge, rather than let it fall into evil hands."

"Ah, yes, that is also common procedure for the followers of the Light," Snyder said, "not that I have heard anything about the kind of magic you are searching for. Quite to the contrary, really. Wards are, after all, intended to strengthen barriers, such as those between worlds, not tear them down."

Ami shook her head. "I'm not going on a conquering spree and starting a reign of terror if I can help it." The blue-haired teeneager sighed. "It sounds as if I'll have to research a way to get home myself, unless Beryl sends us an unexpected windfall." The pencil lying in front of her unoccupied seat took down a note regarding this. "That leaves destroying other Keepers as the most achievable and most pressing goal."

Cathy snickered. "Says a lot about the others, doesn't it?"

Jered ignored the blonde and nodded in Mercury's direction. "You are actually in a fairly strong position. The only dark god you need to care about is in no shape to interfere, your current location is untraceable, you have an unlimited source of wealth, and you have the food problem solved. And that's not even mentioning the strange stuff you are doing with this 'electricity' thing."

"All of which is kind of counteracted by her total lack of an army," his girlfriend interrupted.

"She has the logistics and is a Keeper. Attracting an army should be simple for her."

Ami stepped forward and walked around the table. "I'm not so sure about that. I don't want any creatures that will gleefully kill or murder innocents. That really cuts down on the available options."

"Ask Metallia for youma," Jadeite suggested. "She may need a few gifts as encouragement, but youma are pretty much superior to any of the creatures we have encountered so far."

Ami wasn't so sure about that. To her, the horned reaper and the dragon seemed to have been much harder to injure down than any youma she had encountered here. Then again, her powers were not that destructive. For a brief moment, she imagined Sailor Moon's tiara bisecting the red monstrosity, and felt a fierce satisfaction at the mental picture.

"They are also smart enough to follow your orders to the letter, and can use their abilities non-lethally, if you so desire," Jadeite continued.

"I disagree. Depending so much on the favour of a dark god, that you are not particularly serious about serving in the first place, is a recipe for disaster. I would suggest that you adapt your research into animated armour and make weaker but mass-producible models." Snyder glowered at the dark general as he spoke, unhappy with the direction the evil man was trying to coax Mercury into.

"Those sound both like viable options," Ami said, looking at the desk as she continued in a thoughtful tone of voice "but the armours would still need operators, and I don't want to do anything that would cause Metallia to awaken faster. Sorry, Jadeite."

"Beryl will have no such qualms," the dark general said, crossing his arms as he looked at her.

"Let's exhaust the other options first," the young Keeper said, not meeting the man's gaze. "Jered, what do you think?"

Prompted such to give an opinion, the man spoke "I think hiring the regular monsters from the Underworld would be the most efficient course of action. Trolls and orcs are smart enough to follow orders, and if you can keep them entertained and well-fed, they won't feel all that bloodthirsty."

"Ahem. I foresee some problems when they notice the lack of imps. They may not be willing to follow such a deficient-appearing Keeper." Snyder said. The acolyte put his hands on the table, pushing his chair backward so he had more room. He gestured toward the world map. "We will also need to seize locations close to Underworld portals."

"Unless we can handle transport differently," Ami said as she summoned her computer and flipped open its cover. "Is there a pattern to the portals' occurrence?" Taking into account the knowledge she had plundered from the late Keeper Malleus' mind, she expected the answer to be negative.

The others confirmed her suspicions with mute shakes of their heads. "There are none recorded in undersea areas, but that's the only immediately obvious conclusion that has been drawn about their distribution in the literature that I have been exposed to,"

Snyder amended.

"Is that because none have been found, because nobody has built any there, or because no appropriate locations exist?" Ami asked for clarification, but got only a shrug from the redhead in response. "Something to investigate, then." She jotted a note down on her list. "That leaves selecting a proper staging area."

"Well..." the others focused their attention on the world map.

Following their gazes, Ami said with a pained expression "I can't go to inhabited lands. As long as I don't have full control over the corruption, I will be doing as much long-term damage as the Keepers I will be defeating would have done."

"I don't see the problem. Just turn off the dungeon heart once you have beaten the enemy," Cathy suggested dismissively.

"I can't," Ami confessed, "the crystal type heart doesn't have a sleep mode like the organic type. As with all of its magic, its connection to the Keeper is much more solid than for the organic type."

"What? Why didn't you take care of that when you designed it?" the scar-faced blonde all but shouted as she half-rose from her seat.

The blue-haired girl cringed. "Please realise that the dungeon hearts are incredibly complex artefacts and that I have no formal magical education. Yes, I made a few adjustments to the design I managed to reproduce, but it's basically a *copy*! I know how to create it and how to modify some of its easier accessible properties, but most of its internals remain enigmatic to me. And the connection to the Keeper is one of its most deepest-rooted functions."

"Great." Cathy muttered, sinking back down into her chair.

"This makes the hearts a huge liability," Jered said, tapping his pen against the table repeatedly as he digested the new information.

"Um, it's not impossible for me to shield myself against the effects of being banished into the dark gods' realm when one of the hearts is destroyed," Ami said, raising her healthy hand in a placating gesture even as she paled, "at least theoretically speaking. I will need more

data to work with, though."

"Ah, yes. As I can hardly imagine that you would be willing to experiment on yourself, that would mean crushing the hearts of other Keepers. That is a plan that I have not the slightest objection against," Snyder said, relaxing.

"Well, that doesn't leave many choices. Useful choices, that is. The North and South Pole are not inhabited, and neither is the ocean, but they are also far from anything useful." Jered analysed, his eyes still on the map.

"My wind power plants won't work underwater," Ami added.

"I can't believe I'm suggesting this," Cathy said with a fake shiver, "but what about another iceberg? Rather than have it as a secret hideout and treasure chamber, make it a warship, and dock wherever you need a portal or want to experiment with corruption."

"That's the best idea so far," the teenager nodded. "Yes, I think that's what we'll do."

"That leaves another important decision, though," Jadeite said, "where do we strike first?"

The question took Ami by surprise, and she covered her mouth with her hand and stared at the map. After a minute of silence, she decided "Zarekos. I need the secrets of the Avatar Isles, there are no innocents that could be caught in the crossfire, he's using the same type of dungeon heart as I am, and my corruption cannot ruin the country any further." Taking a deep breath, she added in a more resigned tone of voice "It will also provide enough space to lock any prisoners away in humane conditions when the misguided defenders of the land inevitably attack me. Darn it."

"Quite a difficult target." Jadeite paled at the memory of the swarm of frenzied bloodsuckers and rubbed his neck without consciously noticing that he did.

With red-flashing eyes, Ami promised "We will be better prepared this time. Much better."

"Indeed. I shall get in contact with my old associates and see what I can find out about killing vampires," Snyder said as he stood up.

Rising as well, Jered offered "Give me the crystal ball and I shall see if I can find your old minions and rehire them."

"Not the mistresses!" Ami and Snyder shouted as one, then looked at each other in surprise.

Behind them, Cathy giggled. "I'll try to make us some money in the meantime. As for you, Jadeite," she winked at the grey-uniformed man, "I believe it's your turn to cook."

Sitting at the table in the warm living room, between piles of books that surrounded her like ramparts, Ami worked at her palmtop, refining the blueprints for the rooms her dungeon heart could construct.

"Mercury? Can I talk to you for a moment?"

"Yes, Jadeite? What can I do for you?" Ami put away her computer and swivelled in her chair, blushing lightly at the sight of the curly-haired blonde. It was uncommon for him to seek her out alone. What could he want?

"Actually, I wanted you to continue your magic lessons. Beryl might try something, and you are quite vulnerable with neither your freezing spell nor the golems to protect you."

He's concerned for my safety! Ami's heart made a joyous leap. *Of course he is,* the less hormonal part of her mind chimed in, *you are his only chance at survival and revenge.*

"Thank you for worrying about me, Jadeite," the blue-haired girl said with a smile, "but you are partially wrong. I can still cast the Shabon Spray Freezing, I just have to draw it out over several seconds."

"That is too slow to be useful in combat," the dark general cautioned and stepped closer.

"I pre-cast the spell and put some instances into storage for later use," Ami said and stood up. "I have also developed a new trick. Do you want to see it?" the blue-haired girl's smile was positively impish now.

"Oh?" Jadeite raised his eyebrows and made a "go ahead" gesture with his gloved hand.

"All right. Shabon Spray!" The senshi spun in place, tumbling a bit to the side due to having her left arm immobilised, and released a spray of azure bubbles from her right hand.

The bubbles burst, filling the air with an impenetrable greyish-white fog that spilled out into the corridors. Jadeite felt the temperature drop, and could only make the short girl out as an indistinct silhouette standing less than three steps away. "I already know that-" he began with a smirk, but stopped when he felt a draft. Before his eyes, the fog billowed and streamed toward Mercury, becoming less dense as more and more airborne moisture gathered to her left. In the time it took him to blink, all of the murk had disappeared and coalesced into a gurgling, transparent hand. The disembodied limb stood on its fingers, resembling a watery spider that reached up to the blue-haired girl's waist. He took a step back when the thing rose into the air, wavering as it did. "What is *that*?"

"It's my Shabon Spray, compressed into that shape with my Keeper powers and the telekinesis you taught me," Ami said and made the fingers of the hand curl. "In essence, it's just water, but I use it as an intermediary to apply my Keeper powers even to things that don't belong to me." Some of the happiness faded from her face. "I came up with the idea when going over the battle with the Reaper. Instead of controlling a weapon, I could control something that can't be taken away." Her cheeks coloured a bit from remembering that he the curly-haired blonde had seen her topless during that situation, so she hastily continued. "I don't have perfect control yet, but..." the liquid hand flashed into position before her without crossing the intervening space, fingers held up and palm facing the dark general. He could see her black-clad form through the obstacle, distorted by the clear water. "... it's enough to protect myself with." The hand formed into a giant fist and slammed into the ground, shattering the thin layer of stone and cracking the ice underneath. Ami stared at

the debris-strewn crater sheepishly and scratched her head. "Oh. I overdid it a little."

"Intriguing," Jadeite said, his ears ringing from the noise of the impact as the rising dust cloud coated the bottom of his trousers with grey. "But how well does it work outside of your own territory?"

"It's made entirely by magic, so I can store and retrieve it at will on neutral territory. I won't be able to do that on enemy land, but other than that, it should work fine. The crystal heart's arcane might is higher than that of the organic type, and it should be able to brute-force most spells even into hostile territory."

"Ah. So you don't want to continue the lessons, then?"

Was that a hint of disappointment in the blond's voice? "I didn't say that," Ami replied quickly. "I'd be grateful if you continued teaching me. I still have a lot of questions concerning the finer points of telekinesis."

"That's good to hear," Jadeite said, and the corners of his mouth curved upwards just a hint. It was a small smile, but it still made Ami's heart flutter, as it was the first one that had reached his eyes. "Well then," he said with a mock bow, holding his right arm over his chest, "let's go and assess what you can do with your newly discovered ability!"

Construction Work

Originally on 2010-03-18T23:32:00

Ami's head jerked aside, out of the way of the fist-sized white projectile that passed so close to her left ear that she could hear its whistle even through the woollen cap she was wearing. She lowered her altitude until her boots nearly brushed against the snow covering the steep-sloped hill beside her. With its flank protecting her back, she searched the sky for her opponent. Four white streaks against the blue background darted toward her, their movement drawing her gaze as they curved around to come at her from different angles. With a faint splash, the first of the snowballs struck a large floating hand, sending ripples over its surface. The human-sized disembodied limb swerved through the air in an arc and slapped two more of the incoming balls aside, then disappeared. It intercepted the last of the snowballs just before it struck Ami, and she watched its powdery mass break apart and dissolve in the clear water.

A chuckle drew her gaze back down to eye level. Jadeite shimmered into existence about a stone's throw away, hovering in the air. "Not bad, not bad." His grin widened, and he curved the fingers of his left hand upward. Globs of snow lifted from the ground, gathering into a set of five snowballs that levitated in a horizontal line in front of him. "But can you stop this, too?"

Ami stared at his projectiles, waiting for the slightest twitch that would give away their course, and held her watery hand at ready to her right. Faint clouds of condensed breath appeared in front of her face as she leaned forward, prepared to dodge or block at a moments notice. She only noticed the faint rumbling from above when a shadow fell over her, and then it was too late. "Gah!"

The miniature avalanche flowing down the hill rose like a wave breaking on the shore before crashing down on the blue-haired girl and swallowing her, carrying her along. Jadeite watched with amusement as the mass of snow continued on its way down, with one of Mercury's arms or legs sticking out of the main cloud from

time to time as she rolled downhill. She finally came to a rest in a large bank of churned snow at the foot of the slope.

Ami's back parted the snow as she surfaced from beneath the thin layer covering her and pulled herself to her knees and elbows. She frowned at the floating blond through the wet bangs dangling in front of her eyes. "Why you!"

With a gurgling noise, rivulets of glittering water rose from the wet snowdrift around her, reforming into the large, liquid hand. Without hesitation, it slapped the piled up snow with its back, spraying a cold sheet of whiteness into Jadeite's direction. The curly-haired blond chuckled as he teleported out of its path, reappearing on top of the hill.

"Better luck next time!" the dark general floated above the ground with his hands behind his back, puffing out his chest and smirking down at the snow-covered girl. His cheerful expression wavered a little as the giant hand scooped up a ball of snow fit for its size and tossed it up and down, as if to measure its weight. "If you think you can hit me with that, then-"

Something white emerging from a flash of blue directly in front of him, growing until it filled his entire field of vision within a split second. Sparkling red eyes glowed above a victorious smile as the freezing cold impacted his face and filled his half-open mouth. Flailing his arms, he toppled over and landed with his rear in a snowdrift. He coughed and sputtered as he sat up. Seeing the steely-blue eyes blinking at her through a mask of snow, Ami couldn't help herself and started giggling, hiding her mouth behind her hand.

With a swipe of his grey sleeve, Jadeite wiped himself clean, revealing furrowed brows and clenched teeth. His skin was red, either from contact with the cold ice, or from the anger. He glared up at the girl, prompting another fit of giggles. His expression mellowed as he stared at her extended hand. The corners of his lips twitched as he gripped it and let the girl help him to his feet, and a short laugh managed to escape. "Stole my distraction trick? Well, they do say that imitation is the most sincere form of flattery." He stood, and Ami suddenly noticed how close they were to each other, and backed

away with a faint blush. "However, we should probably get back to work."

"Yes, we should," Ami agreed, and her feet lost contact with the ground as she followed the dark general higher into the frigid air. She still couldn't quite believe that she was flying under her own power, despite having done it several times before. There was a large difference between floating within a cavern and doing the same under the clear sky, though, and the view of the sunlit Arctic was breathtaking from up here. She would have to share this skill with her friends when she got home! With a wistful smile, she decided that Usagi's instruction would have to take place indoors to take her clumsiness into account.

"That one looks as if it could fit our needs," Jadeite called to her, shouting over the wind rushing past as they flew.

Shaken from her musings, Ami followed his outstretched index finger with her gaze, and found a tongue of ice protruding into the sea like a peninsula. From up here, the iceberg looked tiny amidst the bobbing ice floes surrounding it. She touched her right ear, fumbling through the fabric of her blue cap before managing to hit the earring, and her visor appeared. "It's slightly less voluminous than the other base," she concluded upon reading the measurements flickering across the glass. "Longer but narrower, and with less draught."

"Less space, but much closer to the shape of a ship's keel."

"Let's have a closer look at it," Ami suggested before disappearing within a twister of snow that enveloped her form. Jadeite saw a small blue flash in the distance below, signifying her arrival on the iceberg, and followed.

When the dark general shimmered into existence next to the young Keeper, she had her computer out already. The giant water fist was back and punched the ground, making a loud banging noise, only slightly muffled by the layer of snow blanketing the underlying ice. On Ami's computer screen, concentric red circles expanded outward, denoting the tremors caused by the impact. "No internal weaknesses," she said, registering Jadeite's arrival in passing. "It

will be suitable for our purposes, once we have cut it loose from the mainland." She peered over the upper edge of her screen toward the imaginary line where the peninsula connected to the continuous ice shelf that covered the northern polar region.

"Are you going to start out by creating a new dungeon heart?" Jadeite was standing so closely behind Ami now that she could feel his body heat as he looked over her shoulder at the display. Feeling the blood rush to her cheeks, she shook her head. "No, the iceberg is not balanced yet. I'm sure it will rock and turn once it's swimming freely, and I don't want to end up with the heart stuck in the ceiling."

"Makes sense. How are you going to get it loose?"

"Digging and blasting," the blue-haired girl said, "it's going to take a lot of work, though." She smiled up at the curly-haired blond. "I'll need your glamour magic to create some of the equipment. Are you familiar with bucket-wheel excavators?" Ahead, the hand made of water was gathering up snow and carving it into a sculpture that vaguely resembled a scaled-down version of the machine in question. At the dark general's nod, she brought up some schematics on her palmtop and turned it so he could see the screen better. "Now, can you make the wheel more like a buzz saw? If we affix imp picks to it, we won't need to take care of loosened ice, which should speed things up."

"Hmm. Could work." The grey-clad man narrowed his eyes at the snow model of the excavator. "You want me to use that as a base object? It won't last long."

"It only needs to last long enough."

Wasting no more words, the dark general spread his arms, and a pillar of snow shot from the ground, rising high into the air and momentarily hiding the rough sculpture from sight. Groans of shifting metal could be heard from within, and when the spiralling cloud peeled away, it revealed shadowy, strutted structures looming like the skeletons of long-necked dinosaurs in the murk.

"Amazing!" Ami gaped as the drifting snowflakes settled and more of the machinery became visible. After staring in silence for a moment,

she closed her mouth and nodded. "Thank you. I'll make the picks now. Please set it to work along that line." At her gesture, the floating hand stabbed a finger down into the ice where she had indicated, and dragged the digit rapidly across the surface of the iceberg. Snow fountained out behind it like the wake behind a speedboat, and the furrow it cut into the white layer couldn't be missed.

"Nephrite. Once again, you disappoint." Beryl's voice sounded calm and bored, but the brown-haired general knew enough to detect the undercurrent of steel it hid.

He clenched his teeth and stood very rigid. The throne room's air felt cold on his sweat-soaked forehead, and he knew that he was pale like a sheet. To any of the many courtiers skulking about just outside the light radius surrounding the queen, he would appear quite terrified. From the corners of his eyes, he could see that snake Zoisite hover in the air not far away, looking insufferably smug at his fellow general's misfortune. In truth, the only thing Nephrite feared right now was covering the throne room's finely polished tiles with vomit. He couldn't imagine his Queen reacting well to *that*. His stomach felt as if it was full of stones, and he could taste the bile rising in the back of his throat. In short, he felt sick like a dog and was trying not to show it. So much for that *brilliant* plan.

As usual, the stars had chosen his newest victim, some short-haired teenager with a passion for cooking. Sounded easy, right? Just smile at her, put the evil mark on a spoon, and leave. Except the plan had backfired. Sure, the girl had been so impressed with his gentle encouragement that she had thrown herself into the work like a girl possessed - hah! However, the problems had started when her family confronted him with dark glowers on their faces as they heard the noises coming from the kitchen. They had politely but insistingly prevented him from leaving. He could still hear the words of the middle sister in his mind *"Oh no, after what you have* done*, it would be horribly impolite to just send you away without treating you to what our little sister is preparing."* The evil monster must have been smirking at him inwardly the whole time. Then, surprisingly strong hands had pushed him back into the kitchen. Where his 'victim' had

enthusiastically force-fed him her creations, despite his protests. Did he mention that she was actually a horrible cook? Thank you, stars. Thank you so much. In hindsight, getting away might have been worth blowing his disguise as Masato Sanjouin.

Oh, Beryl was still berating him. He didn't even know what had happened to his youma, but assumed that the senshi had gotten to her. It fit the usual pattern. He certainly hadn't received any energy from this endeavour. Hmm, wasn't it getting a bit hot in here? And when had the Queen installed something that made her throne blurry and rock back and forth?

"...and therefore-" Beryl stopped in mid-sentence, orange eyes widening in surprise. The background murmuring ceased briefly before redoubling in volume. It didn't happen every day that a dark general just keeled over in the middle of an audience for no discernible reason. "Nephrite? What is the meaning of this?"

No answer came forth from the man sprawled out on the ground. Awkward silence followed her question, and the assembled youma courtiers shifted nervously in the shadows. There was no protocol for handling this type of events.

Zoisite took the opportunity to float down and land next to the inert form of his rival. He didn't bother checking if the other general was still alive - the fact that his body wasn't dissolving was proof enough of that, unfortunately. He prodded Nephrite with the tip of his left shoe, hard, but did not manage to elicit a reaction from the prone general. The effeminate man bowed to Beryl, who was watching him with her head cocked to the right. The fingers that were perpetually hovering over her black orb were still for the moment. "My Queen, I think this demonstrates that general Nephrite is unfit for his current responsibilities. I would be glad to collect energy for our Great Ruler in his stead. You should punish him for being such a failure."

"Are you presuming to tell me what I should do?" Beryl asked sharply, furrowing her brows underneath her boomerang-shaped black tiara.

The ponytailed general snapped to attention, "No, my Queen, I was just thinking that-"

The ruler of the dark kingdom raised her palm, motioning for him to be quiet. Her gaze returned to the body lying on the floor and remained there while she thought. Now it was Zoisite's turn to sweat as he waited for his liege's decision. Her crystal ball flared black, and Nephrite sank into a pool of darkness that opened underneath him.

"Very well. Zoisite, you will take over Nephrite's duties. I shall assign him a less *straining* task," she said, stressing the last word disdainfully. *Maybe his astrological divinations will be useful for solving my other problem, at least.*

"Watch out, it's going to break off soon!" Ami's shout echoed over the icy landscape, carrying over to Jadeite, who was floating over the deep trench that their combined efforts had dug into the ice. A bright flash from its depths lit up the ice from below, and the sight of the white jet of froth rising into the air coincided with the sound of Ami's explosion spell reaching her ear. The excavator hunkered over the narrow abyss swayed dangerously when the ground trembled.

"I see what you mean," Jadeite replied, rising higher into the air. Below, the tremors intensified, and the incline of the iceberg steepened, accompanied by a cacophony of loud cracking and bursting sounds. With a flash of blue, Ami joined the flying dark general in the air and watched as the last ice bridge connecting the peninsula with the mainland splintered with deafening noise. As the gap underneath the digging machine widened, the ice underneath its tracks crumbled, and the groaning mass of metal tumbled toward the dark waters below, spinning as it fell. As if in slow motion, the enormous block of ice tilted forward, submerging itself in the ocean. Ami saw the inrushing water sweep its surface clean, carrying away the dozens of imp corpses that Ami had divested of their tools, making them disappear as if they were mere dust. The frothing, bubbly water closed over the iceberg, sucking in the surrounding ice floes, and fountained upwards. Carried by its buoyancy, the gigantic piece of ice reascended, breaking the surface like the back of an enormous whale and sending house-sized waves in all directions. As Ami had predicted, it was now presenting its smooth, bluish-white

underside to the air. "We did it!" She cheered, admiring the majestic form of what would be her warship's hull through the blue-tinted glass of her visor. *Now to turn it into a proper dungeon.*

The solid portcullis retreated into the ceiling with a loud scraping noise. Hot and humid air escaped from the opening, carrying with it the earthy smell of ripe wheat in fall. Cathy stood in front of the chamber, a scythe slung over her shoulder, and peered through the fog that condensed out of the air as soon as it met the cooler environment of the corridor. "Well, it doesn't look as if our first harvest burned to death," she said, peering across the vast, domed chamber that was filled with rows of golden-brown ears just begging to be harvested.

Jered, who entered behind her, looked up at the vaulting ceiling that held the powerful lamps which had baked the soil into parched, cracked wasteland wherever the subterranean pipes weren't pumping water directly to the plants' roots. He frowned at the decoration framing the huge bulbs. "Well, that doesn't look only a little bit creepy."

Curious, Cathy followed his gaze and saw that a vast bas-relief of a sun sat at the highest point of the dome. The disc, surrounded by a serrated edge, showed a face, which wasn't that unusual for artwork. The fact that it was furrowing its brows and had its mouth wide-open in a vicious snarl was more out of the ordinary. The carved sunrays radiating outward in a star pattern, layered above each other, resembled an octopus' tentacles and were at least as disturbing as the face's four bared fangs."Huh, doesn't look like her style," the blonde said and shrugged. With a look at the plants, she snickered. "Kind of makes me wish we still had the Reaper around. Imagine his expression if Mercury put him to work reaping wheat."

That got a chuckle out of her brown-haired boyfriend. "Don't let her hear that. She probably doesn't want to remember that monster." He took an experimental swing at the crops with his own scythe.

"You'd be surprised. I think she made these blades with his spell. They have the same balance."

"Really?" Jered stopped in surprise. "She actually learned that- ah, what am I saying. It's in a book. *Of course* she learned how to cast that thing. Can't be that difficult if the horned reaper can use it." His expression turned more lecherous. "Hey, do you think you could learn that spell with a bit of study? That would be a sight to s- Ow! No elbowing in the ribs while at work! I could have cut one of my toes off, you know?"

"Oh, you poor baby," the blond giggled. "Who knows, it couldn't hurt to know some magic." She bent down to gather up a bundle of cut ears and threw them into a wicker basket. "I wish we still had imps for this. Haven't you been able to hire some minions to delegate tasks to yet?"

The weasel-featured man shook his head as he mowed down more wheat. "I didn't have much luck so far. Most of the magicians were happy to come back, but the orcs and trolls had already found new employment. The bile demons I didn't ask, for obvious reasons, and I couldn't locate the dragon. So it looks as if we are on our own for the moment."

Ami's new dungeon heart, as well as her private quarters and those of her companions, were located in what would be the rear of the ship once she got around to creating the engine room. In short, it would contain all the portions of her mobile dungeon that she didn't want the hired help to wander around in. Her new throne room formed the junction between the high-security tract of the new complex and the regular one. This audience hall was much more pompous than Ami would have wished for herself, but Jadeite had urged her to project the image of an all-powerful warlord if she was serious about hiring and keeping troops. Thus, the room was much longer and taller than necessary, and felt empty despite the score of black and purple-robed men sporting long beards and oiled hair, who were staring at their surroundings in awe.

Ami admitted that the cathedral-like hall with its pillar-framed, polished ice walls looked rather grandiose. They glittered like crystal in the light of the electrical braziers standing left and right of her throne. As if that wasn't enough, the floor was a single smooth

mirror that reflected the ceiling above, giving anyone who walked across it the daunting impression of being suspended above a hollow abyss, even if they were able to feel the solid ground underneath their feet. The blue-haired girl smiled as she remembered Cathy's reaction to the room. "Well, I'm certainly not wearing a skirt in here," the blonde had said after spotting her mirror image on the floor.

Sitting on her massive throne that was carved to resemble the Mercury symbol - its back was round and crowned with two projecting horns - Ami felt slightly silly in her costume. It was one of her better Keeper outfits, with black trousers, golden buttons on her blouse, and many filigree decorations. The black cape, draped strategically over her left arm to hide the sling, was new, and her Mercury tiara clashed slightly with the ensemble. Nevertheless, the assembled magicians slowly approaching her seemed properly intimidated, if their furtive glances and refusal to meet her glowing eyes was any indication.

On the other hand, she had the nagging suspicion that she could have turned up in a clown suit, and still nobody would have dared laughing at the Keeper who had allegedly beaten a horned reaper to death with her bare hands. And even if she wasn't scary enough by herself, then the giant gauntlet clinging to the wall above her throne like a metallic spider, moving its fingers from time to time, would discourage any disrespect.

"I am glad to see that so many of you have decided to return into my service, and I think I see even some new faces among you." Ami let her gaze wander over the assembly of universally pale warlocks and magic users. They suspended their hushed conversations as she spoke up and gave her their undivided attention. "So let's not waste time with idle speeches. I have several research projects for you. If the warlocks who researched my fire immunity spell would please step forward?"

Three of the robed figures separated from the group and approached, lining up in a respectful distance in front of the Keeper. With their hoods up to protect themselves against the cold, the haggard men resembled black cones. Ami nodded at them in recognition. "I have a task here that will draw on your previous

experience with the fire immunity spell. I want you to adjust it so that I can determine a certain temperature at which the immunity will kick in."

"Could you clarify your objective please, Keeper? I'm not sure I understand the goal of this research," the left warlock spoke up.

"Of course. I need a spell that is able to prevent further heating once a certain temperature has been reached. For example, imagine a kettle full of water. The fire immunity spell would normally prevent it from getting much warmer than room temperature. I want the heat limit to be adjustable, so that I could put said kettle on a fire and specify that I want to keep the water just below boiling temperature, no matter how hot the fire becomes."

"I think I understand you now. Thank you for the clarification." The warlock bowed. "However, if I may ask, what use would such a spell have?"

"You would be surprised," Ami said, and her eyebrows rose in amusement. Some of the more sinister-minded dark wizards in the back shuddered. "Dismissed." The three minions bowed deeply and slunk back into the waiting group.

Ami raised her voice, and three stacks of papers appeared before her, floating in the air. "I will not single out anyone for the other three projects, as they vary in scale and difficulty. Choose them according to your talents and knowledge." The instructions flew forward, fanning out as they took up a hovering position in the middle of the room. Immediately, warlocks congregated around the sheets and started reading them with interest. "The first project is about developing a small device that can power magical items. It is supposed to use gold as fuel, in a similar way as dungeon hearts do."

Immediately, a few of the magicians turned toward the floating project descriptions she was pointing at. "Sounds like something that is right up my alley," the alchemist said, standing out among the mass in his stained white lab coat.

Ami gave him a court smile. "The second project is a variation of this

device. Instead of gold, it should turn lightning into magical power." One of the warlocks raised his hand and looked at her questioningly over his shaggy white beard. "Yes, I know that casting a lightning spell just to use it as fuel would be hideously inefficient. Please do not concern yourself with that." The raised hand sank down.

"Lastly, I need warding schemes that block scrying and teleportation. I am aware that this is a difficult task with barely any solid foundations to start from. I will therefore not punish failure to achieve tangible results while conducting that research." A few warlocks that had eyed said project with interest, but seemed hesitant to approach it, overcame their reluctance after hearing that proclamation. Soon thereafter, all the minions filed out of the room with their instruction sheets, leaving Ami alone on her massive throne. She let out a breath of relief and slumped her shoulders. Holding a regal pose all the time was hard work!

A black ellipse appeared in the air before her, startling her and interrupting her break. Jadeite hopped out, carrying a small cage in his gloved hand. "I found some rats for you," he greeted, holding them as far away from himself as is arms would let him. Upon noticing the blue-haired girl, the grey rodents' angry squeaking died down, and they huddled against the bars furthest away from her, quaking in terror. "An old recruit found me, too. Unfortunately."

Something black and green squeezed through the ebony portal, dropping to the floor like a wet sack. Ami looked away from her new pets and down at the unfolding mound of wriggling tentacles sliming up her floor. "Oh. It's you. Welcome back." She shook one of the extending tendrils, accepting the creature's allegiance once again, and wondered what to do with it.

"Keeper Mercury. It is good to see you again. I do like what you have done with the place. It's a bit cold though.

"You have grown, haven't you? Just how dexterous are you with those tentacles of yours?" Ami asked, giving the nest of eyes and writhing pseudopods a curious once-over.

"Very. I assure you that I would be able to fulfil any request to your fullest satisfaction.*"*

"Really?" The blue-haired girl smiled at the slime-covered creature, and her teeth gleamed white in the light. "I think I have just the job for you."

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Audience with the King

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A large grey rat stood on its hind legs within a glass cylinder, steadying its forepaws against the curved surface. Its furry noise twitched nervously as it spotted the white-clad figure approaching through the tidy lab.

"Don't worry, nobody is going to hurt you." Wearing a lab coat over her dark clothing, Ami leaned over the transparent prison, and the creature trapped within redoubled its frantic escape attempts. Tiny claws hammered against the glass, making soft clinking noises. The smell of scared animal wafted up to Ami's nose from below.

To the rodent's increasing terror, it found itself lifted into the air and flipped on its back by an invisible grip. Admiring the lighter-coloured underside of the animal for a moment, the Keeper resisted the urge to stroke the fuzzy-looking pelt. That would just get her fingers nipped. Instead, she lifted a pair of tweezers and brought them close to the rat's neck, keeping them out of range of the animal's flailing limbs. The smooth, bald tail whipped across her wrist as the animal wiggled in her telekinetic grasp, but she didn't even twitch. Her attention was focused on the small metal loop that she was manoeuvring over the rodent's head, moving it gently past the animal's small, round ears. With the tweezers, she tugged at one end of the collar, tightening it around the creature's neck. As if a flip had been switched, it ceased its struggles and went as rigid as if it had just undergone taxidermy. Ami put the rat onto her workbench, where it stood motionless. Only the faint quivering of its nose as it breathed betrayed the fact that it was still alive. Now that she no longer had to restrain the animal, she quickly managed to strap a short leather belt around its midsection and used it to hold a rectangular stone the size of two cubes of sugar in place on the rodent's back.

"My King." The page wearing a red tabard decorated with a stylized white lion bowed toward the elderly man sitting in a gilded chair in front of the cold fireplace. Cushions in royal purple managed to rendered the angular and intricately-carved piece of furniture comfortable. "Your guests have arrived."

"Send them in, send them in." King Albrecht made an inviting gesture with the gnarled fingers of his left hand, showing off a slender, gem-studded ring as he did. The armoured guards standing to his left and right did not stir when the servant stepped aside and seven young woman - fairies - filed into Albrecht's study. If Albrecht hadn't known his bodyguards for years, he would have missed the small signs that betrayed their increased watchfulness, such as the tightening grip on their halberds or the faint turn of their winged helmets. He could be sure that they would be keeping their eyes on the group, and so would he. The visitors were rather shapely, after all, and their tight-fitting white dresses were rather more daring than what the people of his realm wore, bordering on the scandalous. Of course, the relative skimpiness of the garments was very practical. Being back-free was necessary for the wings, and the shortness of the dresses would make sure they wouldn't get in the way when flying.

"King Albrecht, the Sixth Full-Fairy Aerial Recon Force of the Shining Concord Empire," the page introduced the girls, who lined up in a row, sorted by height, and stood at attention. The king noted with some amusement that despite their military demeanour, their eyes were sweeping all over the room, taking in the bookshelves along the wall, the raised wooden panels covering the walls, and the long polished table in passing. They remained far longer on Albrecht himself. While he knew that he was no longer the muscle-bound hero of his youth, he figured that he still cut an imposing figure with his golden crown, the curled white hair, and the deep blue mantle lined with ermine fur. To his secret chagrin, the gaze of the younger girls especially seemed to linger longer on the two other men sitting near the window. "At ease."

"King Albrecht," the tallest of the fairies greeted, curtsying in front of the monarch with a certain lack of grace that spoke of unfamiliarity with the movements. Her companions quickly followed her example.

"Thank you for taking the time to grant us an audience."

The king nodded at the indigo-haired fae and gestured for her to rise. He noted that the hair colours of the girls each corresponded to one colour of the rainbow, but not to its order. "I would be remiss in my duty if I did not listen to Keeper-related news first hand. Rise and be welcome. It is not everyday that I have the pleasure of meeting visitors from the Shining Concord Empire. Do take a seat and partake of the food, if you wish." He motioned toward the large glass bowl containing various fruits of his land, and the redhead was especially quick to take advantage of his offer.

"Let me introduce you to my assistants, who will be quite interested in your report. Dumat, my court wizard," the king nodded at the white-bearded man wearing the standard blue robes and pointy hat of an academy-trained professional magician, "and the charming fellow in the brown robes and the face-concealing hood is my spymaster, whom I won't name, for obvious reasons." Albrecht waited patiently as the fairies introduced themselves and got settled around the table. Once the scraping of the chairs over the ground had ended, he continued. "Now then, I understand that your presence here is the direct consequence of a Keeper's action?"

"Yes, your Majesty. We were originally stationed on a ship that maintained the blockade around the Avatar Islands. We were sent out to investigate a strong feeling of evil that radiated out from a small iceberg approaching the Avatar Islands. As we spotted only a single being that looked like a woman made of ice on it, we chose to engage."

"That was Keeper Mercury?" the spymaster interrupted.

Dandel nodded. "Yes, but not her true form, as we learned later."

The wizard rose from his armchair and walked over to the bookshelf. "Mercury... ah, here is M." his finger wandered across the backs of the books and came to a stop at a newer-looking one. He pulled it out and opened it, already flipping through the pages before he arrived at his seat. "Girl made of ice, yes. That matches Baron Leopold's description of the creature that confronted him."

"How did the Keeper react to your attack?" the King asked.

Returning her attention from the wizard to the monarch, Dandel said "She told us to go away. However, we were unaware at the time that she was a Keeper."

"Another match with how she was trying to dissuade the Baron from attacking her," Dumat said. "I would have expected a Keeper to relish conflict more."

"She may be working under the maxim that an unnecessary battle avoided is a battle won," the spymaster voiced his opinion. "That shows some understanding of long-term strategy."

"How dangerous would you say that she is in combat, having faced her directly?" the King asked, sounding more interested in that aspect of their tale.

"Very. We achieved nothing," the indigo-haired Fae answered solemnly.

"But-"

"Quiet, Anise. Let Dandel talk," green-haired Tilia shushed the redhead.

"Four of us launching lightning at her had little to no effect, and she overpowered one of our sealing techniques. Even with a Keeper's mana pool, that shouldn't have been possible." She heard the scratching of a quill over paper, and saw that the spymaster was taking notes. "She was toying with us the whole time, though. When she got serious, she immobilised our team within moments with some sort of ice spell, and then knocked us out with a touch spell."

"Yes, but we found out her weakness," Roselle chimed in excitedly, which drew raised eyebrows from the men. "When the ice creature was splashed with item-suppressing water, it just dissolved, and Mercury was ejected from it. She isn't so dangerous in her real form, I nailed her with a lightning bolt and she fled! You can use that to beat her!" The orange-haired fairy looked around, a hopeful smile on her face.

"Item-suppressing water. The ice creature is some form of conjuration then, it seems," the wizard mumbled.

"However, your assessment about her lack of toughness is faulty," the spymaster said from beneath his cowl. "Unconfirmed rumour has it that stabbing her in the neck did nothing."

"Well, there you have it. *Unconfirmed*." Cerasse declared in support of her sister.

The brown-robed man steepled his fingers in front of his hidden face. "However, I also have confirmed information from several independent sources that she recently fought in an Azzathra-sponsored duel, and felled a horned reaper with her bare hands and with a single punch."

"Wait wait what?"

"No way!"

"You are telling us that she beat a horned reaper to death? She's scrawny!"

The fairies were shouting all at once now, until Dandel stood up and spread her arms, making shooing motions toward her sisters. When order was restored, she turned to the King apologetically. "I'm sorry about that, but it just sounds so unbelievable. She looks smaller and younger than even Camilla over there." The blonde in question pouted at being singled out as the youngest member of the team.

"Appearances can be deceiving, especially where Evil is concerned," the King said with a sage nod.

"In any case, she defeated us, and then she brought us to another location somehow, where she kept us as prisoners. She didn't appear too interested in torturing or maltreating us, though."

"Well, there was that tentacle monster," Anise pointed out.

"Ahem. She *does* have a reputation for indulging in disgusting and deviant behaviours that are too vile to mention in polite company. She might have wanted to keep you around for those purposes,

disturbing as it may be." The wizard informed them after consulting the notes on Keeper Mercury again. His eyes had gone wide, and his face looked rather red.

"In any case, one of her minions rescued us before she could do anything too bad to us," Camilla said. "I hope she doesn't find out it was him. He didn't look like the evil type with his nice blond hair."

"Yes, he looked rather fetching in that grey uniform."

"That would be the self-proclaimed dark general Jadeite," the spymaster said. "Despite his appearance, he should be considered extremely dangerous. He did manage to abduct Baron Leopold, who is know as one of the greater heroes of our land, from his own castle."

"Oh? What happened to him?" Melissa, the blue-haired fae, asked, dreading the answer.

"Well, it turned out that he was acting on his own. Mercury ransomed him back in exchange for curing her pet tentacle beast."

"It was quite a blow to poor Leopold's ego," Albrecht said, "he brings it up at least once any time I meet him, and demands we take action against her."

"She seems to have a knack for attracting powerful minions she can't control," the wizard commented.

Dandel turned to face him. "Oh? What do you mean?"

"Well, she used to have a horned reaper, but it turned on her. That happened outside of the kingdom though, so reports are a bit sketchy, but the facts seem to agree that she strung it up on top of the city's temple." The spymaster didn't think that bringing up the accounts of public nudity would do anything but distract from the matter at hand. "But please do continue your tale."

"Well, the next time we ran into her was in a small town not far from here. Her minions had tricked a local priest into healing her hand, and we learned about that and tried to ambush her. If what we heard about her right now is correct, then we were rather lucky that she

wasn't around when we attacked."

"But she's plotting something terrible," Melissa interjected excitedly, "I overheard her henchmen talk about her plans! She is trying to control the weather and to tame lightning storms!"

"Alarming if true," the king said. "Dumat, how likely is she to succeed?"

"That is hard to tell. Weather magic is the domain of the gods, for the most part. I do not know where she would even start trying to decipher its inner workings. Certainly not in the Underworld."

"The logical assumption would be the Avatar Islands," the spymaster said. "The Avatar's mages were very advanced in some areas, and I cannot see another reason why she would be interested in that wasteland."

"That does make sense," the king agreed. "We may have to stop her before she reaches her goal, then. Do increase the surveillance personnel assigned to her." Turning to the fairies, he said "Your empire controls the seas. Could you inform your own superiors about this threat, so that we may strike at it together? I will arrange speedy transport to your homeland for you, naturally."

The fairies cheered and nodded their heads enthusiastically. "We would be honoured, your Majesty," Dandel spoke for them all.

"I find it odd that Keeper Mercury would go for a plan like that," the court wizard said. "In all honesty, she sounds like the kind of small fry Keeper who's in it for the perks, but lacks real ambition and generally wants to avoid trouble. Her recent actions only make sense in the light of her gaining the negative attention of one of the movers and shakers and trying to save her own skin by any means necessary."

"A small-fry Keeper couldn't have taken out Keeper Malleus' stronghold," Dumat contradicted.

"Malleus was weakened at the time. She may have just pounced on a dying opponent like a hyena."

"Then how do you explain what she did to Arachne's new dungeon? The troops reported that it was a burnt-out ruin when they arrived."

"Well, um-"

"Besides, she is also some powerful creature that can masquerade as a human well enough to fool a healer!"

"But not powerful enough to avoid getting hurt in the first place!"

"By a *reaper*!"

The king wisely decided to bail from the conversation before his two most trusted advisers could start shouting at each other, again. "I will now leave you and the ladies to examine every aspect of their recent experiences in more detail," he said, rising from his seat. "Dumat, Spymaster, Ladies, do your best to shed some light onto this mystery."

Cathy and Jered were expanding the swimming dungeon, using some of the new equipment that Mercury had provided them with. The hand-held, self-moving drill was a marvel, as long as its cable was plugged into one of the outlets in the finished wall sections further down the corridor.

The blonde moved the former imp pick along the wall, which gave and evaporated under her attentions. This was much less tiring than hacking away at the ice, in the female soldier's opinion. She lowered the boring machine and compared her handiwork with the blueprints. Unexpectedly, she spotted something move on the ground that wasn't one of the rolling ice splinters. "Eww! We have rats! Shabon. Spray. Freez-"

"Wait!" Jered stepped to his girlfriends side and blocked her line of fire with his left arm, causing her to halt in mid-spell. "I think it's supposed to be here. Look at it more closely."

Cathy lowered her crossed arms and examined the large rodent approaching the end of the tunnel more closely, spotting something she had missed on first glance. "What the- ? A backpack?"

The rat scuttled onward without giving the two onlookers a second glance. Upon reaching a spot of uneven ice, it stopped and started swaying. It raised both legs on its left side at the same time, put them down again, then repeated the same for its right legs, and continued alternating between sides.

"What is it doing?"

The rodent rose, standing on its hindquarters, and made grasping motions with its forelegs while it slowly turned in a circle. Beady red eyes came into sight when its nose faced its audience.

"Mercury, is that you?"

The rat finished its odd dance amidst a puff of aquamarine smoke and sank back to its natural pose on all fours. A black halo crackled around it and shot upward like a fast-growing mushroom, solidifying into a red-eyed female form. Colour crept back into the tar-like figure, and she became recognisable as Ami, who raised her right hand and waved a greeting. "Hello, all."

"What were you doing with that rat?" Cathy asked, tilting her head and nodding toward the rodent sitting next to Mercury's boots, which was rubbing its snout with its paws.

"Claiming terrain," the blue-haired girl said courtly. "I am looking for a replacement for imps, and while rats can't do regular work, they should be able to enlarge my territory with the right equipment."

"You are trying to teach rats how to perform a ritual?" Jered's tone of voice made it clear that he doubted the feasibility of this plan, and possibly Mercury's sanity too.

"It's not as strange as it sounds," the young Keeper defended her current project. "The magical power for claiming territory is provided by the dungeon heart. Any minion should be able to do it."

The brown-haired man blinked. "Minion? You hired a rat? How does that work?"

"I didn't hire it. Keepers can command the mindless little creatures that live in their dungeon if they bother to. That's why most natural

creatures instinctively flee from dungeons. Usually, controlling them is pretty pointless, but some Keepers, like for example Arachne with her spiders, find a use for them."

"I see. Next time a gnat is keeping me awake at night, I'll know who to complain to," Cathy said with a grin.

"But, it's a *rat*," Jered drawled, frowning at the grey-furred beast. "I'm still a bit sceptical about a tiny animal being smart enough to pull off a somewhat elaborate magical procedure like that on its own. Its brain can't be any bigger than a cherry."

"It won't need to know what it is doing," Ami said, "That's what the backpack and collar are for. See that stone? It's the same one I used to imprint my combat skills on for the ice golems. Except this time I'm going to store the imp dance skill within, translated into rat body language."

"So we won't have to do the silly dance, but instead there will be rat droppings all over the place? Charming." Cathy was definitely not impressed.

"They will be house-trained rats," Ami said with a sigh. "You know, keeping the dungeon clean without imps could be a problem. I'm already regretting installing that mirror in the throne room's floor. Every little piece of dirt on it shows."

"Tie a little brush to your rat's tail while you are at it," Jered suggested only half-seriously.

"Brr, rats. I find them gross," Cathy said with a mock shudder. "Oh well. If they can do part of my work, I will put up with a horde of rats bustling about the dungeon. However, I see a minor problem." The blonde winked at Ami and grinned.

"Yes?"

"All hail the Queen of Rats!" The blonde snickered. "Rodents aren't exactly the most impressive of animals. Do you really want to be associated with them?"

Wincing at the nickname, Ami nodded thoughtfully. "There is that."

Although that might still be a step up from my current reputation.
"Bats would be the more traditional choice, wouldn't they? Still, the rats are willing to work for grain," she joked.

"You could have snakes. Very creepy, snakes," Jered played along.

"Nonsense, they have no feet to dance with. Now rabbits, that's where it's at," Cathy suggested. "Not intimidating, but very tasty."

"I don't know, having my workers end up in my soldiers' pots sounds counter-productive."

"Maybe we are approaching this from the wrong angle," Jered said. "Consider butterflies! No self-respecting adventurer would want to be known for vanquishing the dreaded," he struck a pose, pointing his finger into the air, and continued in a pompous tone of voice "Cave of Butterflies!" His theatrics prompted the two girls to break into giggles.

"More seriously, I *need* this to work," Ami said, lowering her hand from where it had hidden her mouth. "I won't be able to beat Zarekos if he is able to claim my territory faster than I can claim his. Besides, I don't want to put you two in danger doing that."

"It's much appreciated," Jered answered honestly.

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More Recruits

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"I have a *what*?" Ami said, raising her voice in surprise.

Jered, the target of her outburst, shrugged his shoulders. "A reputation for losing dungeons," the weasel-featured man repeated, shaking his head. "It's making recruitment difficult. Especially since you don't have a portal and they'd be relying on your whim for transport."

Ami shifted her weight on her throne. "But why? I have only lost once!"

"You did abandon two dungeons without a fight, which looks a lot like losing," the brown-haired man pointed out.

"Those were all strategical withdrawals," the blue-haired girl protested. "I would have gained nothing from fighting or from staying around."

"Which doesn't change the fact that it *looks* like defeat to the monsters you are trying to hire. They aren't the brightest tools in the shed. Your warlock staff knows better, of course."

"What about my victories? Malleus, that West Coast keeper, Arachne - twice. The Reaper."

"They hardly count in their opinion. Imbeciles." Jered deepened his voice and smacked his lips as he quoted a bile demon "You're tellin' me that she defeated a Keeper without havin' a dungeon in the area? Weakest Keeper ever - if 't even happened at all!" Taking a more slouching posture, he added in a gravelly imitation of a troll's voice "Yeah, she's tough, but she hasn't *really* beaten Arachne, just led some other enemies to her. Didn't even gain anything from that." Seeing that Mercury was frowning lightly at his impersonations of the creatures he had talked to, the green-shirted man straightened and summarised in his normal way of speaking "Your greatest

achievement so far, from the Underworlders' perspective, is your conquest of Malleus' dungeon. Unfortunately, they take that as an indication that he was far more weakened by the death of his deity than was commonly known."

With the unease she always felt when remembering that battle, or the vile Keeper himself, Ami objected "Malleus wasn't *that* weak. Any of the creatures I released from my service would confirm that!"

"Yes, of course the creatures whom you defeated and let go would say that, wouldn't they? So far, the unaligned monsters regard you as a bit of a scavenger. Feasting on the weak, but fleeing with your tail between your legs at the merest sign of serious opposition."

Ami paused to consider that, and her shoulders slumped. "I just can't win with the rumour mill, can I?"

"To be fair, I do think that some enemies are poisoning the well against you. It's accepted as truth in the Underworld so far that you lost three dungeons already, with no conquests to show for. While your victory over the Reaper impressed the masses due to your personal power, the fact that you are so disfavoured by the dark gods that you were in the duel in the first place is a further mark against you."

"I suppose it doesn't help that I'm not openly worshipping one of them," the blue-haired girl observed. "So what does this mean for recruitment? Does nobody want to work for me?"

"Not quite, but..." Jered let out a long-suffering sigh. "Let's just say that the potential recruits are of rather dubious quality. Anyway, there's of course all sorts of giant vermin - beetles, spiders, flies, that kind of thing. Expendable cannon fodder that's not smart enough to worry about the future."

Ami shook her head. "Not useful enough. Maybe if I had more room on the ship, but not right now."

"Right." Jered grimaced as he moved on to the next option. "Well, then there's a certain number of individuals that have been attracted by your reputation. They fall into two categories. The first is thugs

and warriors of all species who basically just want you to teach them your crazy combat skills. I doubt they'd stick around once they discovered your real skill level." He coughed into his hand. "The second group is vastly more disturbing. They are the ones who hope to put your reputation for deviance to the test. I regret to inform you that this group *also* consists of all genders and species. I could have lived happily for the rest of my life without seeing a troll in black leather fetish gear, thank you very much. " He shuddered in disgust.

Ami felt her cheeks grow hot at the reminder of the vile rumours circling about her. "No thanks, I am not going to hire any of those either. Is there nobody left who wants to work for me who isn't either a warlock, misinformed, disgusting, or not sentient?"

"Well, they may violate the 'disgusting' condition, but that leaves goblins. They'll jump at any opportunity for employment, mainly because there's so many of them and nobody wants them."

"Goblins." Ami remembered the small, green-skinned humanoids that had been some of her first minions. Her lips narrowed into a thin line when she recalled that it was those triangular-eared little fellows who had initially gossiped about her alleged preferences. In her mind, she pictured one of the child-sized figures confronting a looming, pale vampire. She amended the scene to make it five of the sword-wielding greenskins surrounding the enemy, as goblins worked best in packs. Her brain immediately computed the most likely outcome, and the mental image turned into that of a vampire, bloated like a tick and patting its belly, standing over a heap of dismembered limbs. Gruesome, but probably accurate. On the other hand, some minions were better than no minions at all, and her alternatives were worse.

"Very well, hire them," she said, sounding tired and resigned. "I should be able to find some use for them."

The goblins had settled in rather quickly, and also solved more problems than they caused, Ami pondered as she toured her ship. Her first stop was the canteen, a large hall filled with long stone tables and benches where her minions could sit while eating. To

account for the size differences of the different beings, the furniture, and even the counters running along the walls, came in the sizes normal, high, and low. At the moment, only two warlocks were having a break, sitting at one of the human-sized tables. They interrupted their discussion briefly to give a polite nod in her direction when they saw her. The gaggle of goblins stuffing their faces at the low table didn't show that much reverence, probably because they were too engrossed with their meal. Plates clattered as the green creatures emptied them of their contents, foregoing the use of cutlery in favour of using their fingers. Ami wrinkled her nose in slight disgust as she watched one of them wipe his hands on his neighbour's shirt. She would need to talk to them about hygiene again one of these days.

The mouth-watering smell of food emanated from the kitchen, and Ami could hear fat sizzling in pans and water boiling beyond its closed doors. The bored-looking goblin slouching on a footstool behind the counter ignored her as she walked past and slid the double-winged door open. Making sure that the food-preparation area - and the goblin staff handling the food - remained squeaky clean had been one of the few occasions where she had put her foot down, exercising her authority as the absolute overlord of her domain. The large-eared humanoids had, of course, been confused and irritated by the strange and pointless, nay, tyrannical instructions. Nevertheless, as Ami peeked into the room, she could see goblins with buckets and mops scrubbing the floor, and the smell of soap mingled with the aroma of frying onions. Where two hours of lecture and explanations about the dangers of filth, complete with diagrams and pictures, hadn't been able to stop the questions of "Why we must clean? Is silly," a frustrated shout of "Because I say so!" and the appointment of six burly 'health inspectors' with heavy clubs had worked like a charm.

Goblins, so the magical teenager had learned, *loved* titles and being of higher status than their peers, and the recently-promoted greenskins had taken to enforcing the rules with great enthusiasm. Ami had made them understand that they would lose their positions in a heartbeat if they couldn't keep up with Ami's exacting standards, so they were highly motivated in spite of the usually short attention span of their species.

Despite the fact that the six supervisors were large and menacing examples of their kind, they still ducked and covered when the true power in the kitchen snarled at them. Brugli, a hideously obese she-goblin wearing a stained apron, dominated the kitchen visually as well as socially. The matriarch of the goblin clan enforced her authority with the help of an acid tongue and fearsome skill at wielding her hot soup ladle. Even as Ami watched, the oversized spoon emerged from the huge pot of stew that the goblin woman was standing in front of, and unerringly smacked down on the greedy hand of a kitchen aid who was sneaking toward the carrots behind her. The chastised goblin let out a loud shriek and ran around holding his scalded appendage, but Brugly ignored him. It was quite impressive, really. She hadn't even needed to look back.

While Ami wasn't particularly thrilled about having a goblin as chief cook, the warty creature seemed to know what she was doing. Her stew and dumplings would never win any prizes for culinary excellence, but they seemed edible enough. Much better than any of Jadeite's attempts at cooking, the blue-haired girl thought and suppressed a giggle. "Keep up the good work," she said, drawing a few grins from the creatures bustling about the room. "Are there any ingredients you are missing?"

The fat goblin replied without hesitation, her triple chin wobbling as she barked out her answer. "Real meat. Can't believe no chicken in dungeon!"

"Ah, yes. I'm sorry, but for now, you'll have to make do with fish," Ami said. "The warlocks are working on converting the chicken farm design, though. In fact, I am going to check up on them right now."

Walking through the main hallway of her ship on the way to meet with her researchers, Ami heard a cacophony of rapidly approaching footsteps, accompanied by the rattling of armour and loud huffing and puffing. Cathy jogged into view at the head of a disorderly group of sweaty goblins. Ami could see long tongues lolling out of open mouths as the creatures panted from the exertion.

"Halt! Stand at attention! Keeper Mercury is present!" Cathy

snapped, prompting the mob of exhausted goblins to stop and line up in a reasonable approximation of a military formation. Reasonable for goblins. Ami stared at the pitiful-looking group of smelly greenskins lurching and swaying on their feet, forming mismatched rows with different numbers of soldiers. Their gear looked just as ragtag as their attempt at appearing professional. Helmets that were too large or to small, rags of leather that hung askew on their gangly shoulders, and one of the goblins was using a tea kettle that had been hammered flat as a shield. The large-eared creatures shuffled their feet nervously as the Keeper loomed over them, her red eyes glowing brightly. For Ami, being able to loom was a novel and not at all unpleasant sensation, as she usually was the shortest person around. Before she could mention the deplorable state of her minions' gear though, Cathy spoke up.

"Why must you torment me so, Mercury? Just one lap around the ship, and they already look as if a stiff breeze could topple them! How am I supposed to turn this bunch of weaklings into proper soldiers?"

The goblins didn't even have the energy to grumble at the insult.

"Um." Ami scratched her head. "Getting them to take better care of their equipment might be a start. What they are using right now looks as if it could use a very thorough cleaning and repair."

"Cleaning? You got to be kidding. The dirt's the only thing that's keeping their stuff together. Just throw them in the swimming pool, add some soap, stir a bit, and I doubt there will be much left," the blonde suggested, only half joking.

"Well, they do look as if they could use a bath," Ami agreed, causing her creatures to exchange worried glances and to huddle together. "So you think we would be better off replacing their gear completely?"

"Yes, but we don't have a smith right now, and even if we had, I wouldn't trust them to keep it in good shape." The swordswoman scowled at her troops.

"Hmm. Maybe... yes!" the senshi's expression brightened, and she

caught a book that appeared out of thin air. "Please teach them this. All of it."

Cathy took the proffered tome, and her eyebrows rose so high they risked disappearing into her hairline. "The reaper techniques? That's..."

"If even one of them learns that spell, they'll be able to replace part of their gear at a whim, at least. And I have a plan for the combat techniques," Ami said. "It's not as if they could do any worse with them, right?"

"You can say that again," Cathy sighed. With a grin, she said "I'm sure the Reaper would have been overjoyed to learn who would end up learning his prized skills!"

Ami barely recognised the library and attached labs she had built only days ago. Oh, the basic layout of shelves and desks was still the same, but it seemed as if each of the warlocks she employed seemed intent on adding his own personalised brand of chaos to the room. Her inner neat freak curled up into a whimpering ball as she stalked through the rows of bookshelves that reached to the ceiling, passing robed figures standing on ladders, searching for books, or congregating around manuscript-laden pedestals. She had to step around wobbly stacks of tomes several times, and loose pages circled underneath the vaulting ceiling like a flock of vultures. Metallic-smelling fumes rose from a set of test tubes, and Ami made sure to keep her distance. With a glance upward, she wondered for a moment at the purpose of a cross-shaped device with round spheres on its prongs that hung from the ceiling and rotated, making intermittent ticking noises. Her eyes wandered to the electrical lights, which had become a victim of whatever was redecorating her dungeon when she wasn't looking. Orderly, straight rectangles had bent and mutated into clusters of grape-like spheres that sparkled in all colours of the rainbow. What should have been clean white light now looked as if it was falling in through stained glass windows, giving the room an ominous atmosphere. Ami suspected that the heart's corruption effect was somehow at fault, but she would have to investigate further. The wizards seemed to prefer the new

ambience anyway, and had provided their own light sources, most prominent among which were dribbly candles.

Their Keeper was distracted from her musings by a sharp trill to her right, and she spotted a canary cage on an untidy desk. The songbird within was nothing but a skeleton, but that didn't stop it from singing. Before she could investigate the phenomenon more closely, something unusual caught her attention, and she let out a loud shriek, backing away. The outburst alerted the working magicians to her presence, and all turned to look at the black-clad girl in surprise.

Ami's skin was pale as a ghost, and her index finger trembled as she pointed at one of the robed figures that was missing its head and was sporting a gruesome, wet-glistening network of pulsing red veins in its place."W-w-what...?" she stuttered as she tried to keep her lunch down.

"Oh, that's just Nemez," the closest warlock snickered, revealing yellowed teeth. "He's managed to turn his head invisible. Only his head."

"Correct. Now he's got perfectly normal blood pumping through his invisible head. Pretty gross, but the novelty wears off quickly," another minion commented with a snort.

"I s-see," Ami said, lowering her finger. "Where's the head warlock?"

She found the man in his 'office', a secluded corner far in the back of the library. He had to be the eldest wizard here, and due to his stooped posture, his long, grey beard nearly reached the floor. He craned his bald head forward as Ami explained her ideas, resembling a tortoise with the way it emerged from the shell formed by his elaborate hardened collars. He fingered his pencil-thin moustache as he considered his answer. "Give the goblins a fighting chance against vampires by teaching them to use elaborate magical weapons?" he turned away and walked around his desk slowly, bobbing his head like a pendulum. He startled Ami by stopping unexpectedly and barking "Bah! Utter nonsense!" Calmer, he added

"Given complicated equipment and sufficient time, the probability that a goblin will set itself on fire approaches one!"

Ami thought that the same could be said about warlocks. You couldn't become a magic user without possessing a certain level of ambition and drive to learn, so Ami's researchers were this world's equivalent of well-educated people, and all of them were fairly smart. The stupid ones tended not to last long in the evil wizard business. Therefore, she found it always surprising how elementary safety measures could slip their mind from time to time. Take, for example, the group trying to find out how to turn electricity into magical power. Spell not working, despite the calculations looking correct? Simply use more lightning! After that little disaster, Ami had made sure that the restored labs contained nothing flammable.

"Very well. I'll take your advice into consideration."

Still, the lightning-to-power group was making more progress than the gold-to-power one. The former had at least produced an initial design, even if it didn't work. The latter had only managed to successfully turn gold into less gold. And the warding group seemed to take their lack of clear starting point as an invitation to research whatever they felt like. Oh well. Ami would introduce some academic rigour and demand that they turn in detailed documentation of their experiments at the end of the week. She predicted more than a few all-nighters as they scrambled to come up with something that would at least look like what they were *supposed* to have been doing already. "Thank you for your time."

The head warlock let out a sigh of relief when Mercury disappeared, being very glad that he wasn't the target of the shark-like smile that had flitted over her face for a moment.

The next stop on Ami's tour was the menagerie. Squeaking and rustling greeted her, and the smell of dusty straw was thick in the air. The snores of a goblin lying in the heap of fresh hay cut off abruptly as his instincts screamed at him that something dangerous was in the room.

Karo, a goblin with long, bandaged fingers, who was wearing a horned helm that was too large for her, had emerged victorious over her competition for the coveted title of Beastmaster. Ami didn't quite see why the goblins were fighting so hard for the privilege of feeding her rats, cleaning their cages, fastening their backpacks, and getting bitten a lot. Bragging rights perhaps. The animals sitting in the straw-padded cages stacked against the wall were not tame by any means, as they had been captured in the wild. They would do what Ami wanted, but everyone else had better steer clear of their teeth.

The green humanoid opened her eyes and peered at Ami, jumping to her feet hastily as she recognised the Keeper. "Karo on duty, Mistress! Karo doing good work! Rats all counted and caged!"

"Very good." Ami decided to inquire about the health of her land claimers. Rats could transmit all kinds of nasty diseases, after all. "No problems with parasites? Flea, lice, or the likes?"

"Lots. Also itching," Karo said, scratching her butt. "Wait, mean rats? Them fine."

For the last part of her inspection, Ami stopped at the farms. Three of them were currently sealed and filled with steam as the new crops underwent the accelerated growing process. A quick check with her Keeper sight revealed no problems with the young sprouts. The portcullis to the fourth farm was open, and a short, green figure appeared within the doorway, ducking its head as it crawled forward on all fours, toward the exit. Something dark and whiplike whistled through the air and wrapped around the goblin's leg. With a loud wail, the unfortunate creature left a furrow in the soil as it clawed at the ground while a black and green tentacle dragged it back into the farm.

"Haven't you noticed yet that I do have eyes in my back, you mental midget? You! Yes, you, the ugly one with the bitten ear! Don't think I missed you pocketing that! Back to work! You others! If you moved any slower, you'd be walking backwards! Stop slacking off! Get that foot off the plant you klutz! You are trampling the harvest! And you! Stop picking your nose and start digging!"

Ami had rejected her first plan for the tentacle monster, which was using it for harvesting, which in turn would free Cathy and Jered for other tasks. Sure, it had many, many limbs that could grab and collect a great number of plants at once, but she had overlooked one critical fact: slime. Eating food that had once been covered in tentacle goo was an entirely unappealing proposition. Tserk could, however, hold the baskets for goblin harvesters, and was a dedicated overseer to boot. Perhaps too dedicated. The short-haired Keeper felt a bit bad for the goblins working the underground fields, but in all seriousness, they were whining too much. The things were lazy and had the attention span of a butterfly, and she certainly wasn't overworking them. In any case, having a universally hated assignment that she could dole out as punishment could potentially come in handy in future, she pondered with unusual ruthlessness. In any case, it didn't look as if she had to intervene here.

An hour later, Ami stared into her crystal ball, eyebrows rising at the strange sight within. It showed Rei's room, where a frazzled-looking Luna was sitting on the floor, hitting the keys of a typewriter with her paws and managing to compose a letter. "Ami, please find a way back soon. We could really use your calming influence right now."

The girl read the message and took in the tense and unfriendly atmosphere between her two friends with a sinking feeling. Both were sitting on mats in front of the table, but had their backs turned to each other and looked as if they didn't quite want to be here.

"What is going on?" was the transmitted message that Rei and shoved over the table toward Usagi for translation, without looking at the blonde.

"Rei is trying to steal my Tuxedo Mask!" the blonde scribbled in reply as soon as she had deciphered the short sentence of dots and lines.

The raven-haired girl caught a glimpse of what her friend was writing down and whirled around with an expression as if she was about to spit fire. "I was dating him first and you know it!"

"Oh? So why is he always rescuing me, and not you?" Usagi asked

with a half-lidded stare, pointing her index finger at the shrine maiden.

Rei crossed her arms and turned half-away from the blonde. "Maybe that's because I don't need saving all the time, not like a clumsy meatball head I know!" she said with a smug look on her face.

Usagi's face went red, and she let out a growl. Her long pigtails whipped around as she turned her head and huffed "But it proves that he likes me more!"

"Does not!"

"Does too!"

"Does not!"

"Does too!"

Rei very maturely replied by blowing a raspberry at the blonde, which Usagi returned in the spirit it was intended, escalating by also pulling down her left eyelid. Needless to say, the black-haired girl responded in kind and was no longer receptive to Ami's messages.

Luna's head drooped as the girls quarrelled behind her. The black moon cat typed out a summary for Ami, who couldn't hear what her friends were arguing about. "It's a mess. It turned out that Tuxedo Mask is Chiba Mamoru, who Rei was currently dating, and now the two are fighting all the time over him."

Chiba Mamoru? Ami tried to remember who that was. The name conjured up the vague mental picture of an older teenage boy with black hair, who was usually wearing a green jacket. She had barely exchanged more than two words with him, and mostly remembered him for infrequently poking fun at Usagi.

"We found out who he was when general Zoisite ambushed the girls while they were stopping his youma.. Tuxedo Mask foiled his plan, but Zoisite managed to stab him in the leg. He wasn't injured badly, but he couldn't limp away from the girls fast enough to stop them from bringing him to a hospital. And now we know who he is. I certainly hope thatzugkkkkkk"

Keys clacked at random as an errant flying pillow smacked Luna in the back, sending her sprawling over the typewriter's keyboard. The cat let out an angry yowl as she shot out from under the pink object and whirled toward the two bickering girls.

Rei was holding a pillow over her head, frozen in the gesture of swinging it at the blonde as she blinked at the black feline in surprise. Usagi had her hands free and was rubbing the back of her head, a sheepish expression on her face. It turned to worry when she noted the way that Luna was sheathing and unsheathing her claws.

"This is no way for sailor senshi to behave! Enough is enough!"

"Eeep!" More familiar with her advisor and taskmaster, Usagi was already half-way to the door, her pigtails fluttering behind her, when a black blur shot toward Rei. It slammed into the pillow that the raven haired girl had brought down in front of herself at the last moment, and Rei dashed after Usagi, the angry moon cat hot on their heels.

The glow of the crystal sphere faded out as Ami let the vision slip, feeling nagging worry for her friends. They should be working together to fend off the Dark Kingdom, not have a silly spat! Couldn't they see that it would be up to Tuxedo Mask whom he wanted to pursue? She sank back in her chair with a faint blush. *Not that I'm in a position to talk about making rational decisions where love is involved.*

The empty sparkle of the orb in front of her reminded her of the several times over the past days that the glowing of her amulet had alerted her to an enemy spying remotely, interrupting her work. She had only recognised Beryl, the other watchers had been a mystery to her. Three of them had ember-like Keeper eyes, but others had looked like regular people. Agents of good keeping an eye on her, perhaps? All the scrutiny was making her skin crawl, and she couldn't wait for the anti-scrying research to produce some results. Failing that, she would settle for finishing the engines, which would at least make her a moving target. They had been her main project

for the past few days, to the point that she had cut short the time she spent communicating with her friends. That was something she regretted now that Usagi's and Rei's friendship seemed strained. She missed them terribly, but transmitting messages took a large chunk out of her time that she really couldn't afford to lose. Maybe she should get the warlocks to find a better way to contact them?

"Mercury?" Snyder's mental voice drifted into the girl's mind as she was working on her palmtop, attempting to come up with a better way to harness her storm's power for propulsion. The acolyte was currently out on the continent, investigating vampire lore for her. The redhead came straight to the point for once. *"HELP!"*

Last edited: Sep 3, 2016

Vampire Weaknesses

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Alarmed by Snyder's mental shout, Ami immediately focused her attention on the redhead, using her Keeper sight to sense his surroundings. The image of a large hall with a high ceiling carried by a few thick stone pillars crystallised in her mind. At first, she thought that she was looking at the grey interior walls of a castle, but rejected that hypothesis when she noticed the high, vertical windows through which daylight flooded into the room. It illuminated the bleak stone floor with which the acolyte was currently getting acquainted. A tall woman in gleaming white plate mail stood over his prone form, her right fist still extended from her punch. A few trickles of red marred the silvery metal of the gauntlet. Startled figures wearing brown cowls and sitting around low tables looked up from their reading material at the sudden sound of violence, and chairs started scraping over the ground as the monks rose from their seats. This was a monastery, Ami realised belatedly as she noticed several alcoves containing angelic statues, lit by multi-pronged candlesticks that resembled a stag's antlers.

"What was that spell just now, you traitorous bastard? TALK!" Snyder felt himself pulled up by the lapels of his robe and cringed away from the angry face covered in red tattoos that was shouting at him. The woman's black ponytail bobbed angrily up and down as she lifted the shorter man off his feet and slammed his back into a shelf with a thunderous bang. The rickety wooden construction swayed under the blow, spilling books from its sides.

"Ow! Lady, I wasn't- oof!"

One of the monks approached with rapid steps, the cord holding his robe together whipping around his legs as he snapped "Stop this at once! How dare you break the peace of the Scriptorium? Let go of that man!" He frowned when two well-muscled men, one bald and wearing gold earrings, the other with a red moustache whose ends dangled down past his wide chin, stepped in his way. The taller of

the two spread his arms and blocked the monk's path, preventing him from coming to the harried acolyte's aid. Small black eyes peering out from underneath protruding eyebrows met the robed monk's furious gaze without flinching, even when their owner found himself outnumbered by the angrily-muttering row of brown-hooded figures taking up position behind their leader.

The moustached thug, the only of the martial trio who was wearing leather armour rather than plate mail, produced a rolled-up scroll from a bag slung over his shoulder and unfurled it, thrusting it toward the outraged group with the readable side toward them. "Do not interfere! This man," he pointed at Snyder, whose arms were currently being twisted behind his back by his female attacker, "is a confirmed Keeper spy, and as such an enemy of the Crown! This warrant proves it!"

Paper rustled as the head monk ripped the scroll from his grasp with a surly gesture and started reading. He paid especial attention to the sketch that bore a great resemblance to the redhead, and inspected the royal wax seal dangling from the document. "It does look authentic," he conceded, raising his hand as he motioned to his subordinates to stand down. Now their glares focused on the white-and-red robed man groaning in the woman's grasp. Cold metal restraints snapped shut around his wrists, pinching his skin in the process. Immediately, he could feel the draining sensation of his mana being dispersed by the ward worked into the handcuffs. "Bounty hunters." The monk shook his head in disapproval. "I do not appreciate you disturbing the peace within these hallowed halls."

"Whatever, old man," the leather-armoured man turned to his black-haired companion. "Sheila, you got the target secured?"

"Yes, but be careful! He got at least one spell off! What did you do?" The tattooed woman bared her teeth at the redhead, who blinked at her through a partially swollen left eyelid. "Talk, or do you need more encouragement?" She raised her fist again.

"Now wait a minute!" the monk protested, moving forward as if intending to shove the brute blocking his path out of the way.

Ami had seen enough. With a thought, she summoned her two-

hander, easily wielding the massive blade in her single good hand, and disappeared within a column of swirling snowflakes. Not that she had any intention of actually stabbing anyone, but it paid to be prepared. With a blue flash, she rematerialised within the monastery, hovering close beneath the ceiling, and keeping one of the pillars to her back. Despite the distraction caused by the bounty hunters and their prisoner, a few of the monks noticed the faint blue reflections in the glass showcases that contained the rarer tomes. They turned in Ami's direction, their eyes widening in alarm when they spotted her floating, black-clad form. Her cry of "Shabon Spray!" alerted the less perceptive occupants of the room to her presence, but at this point, a burst of gleaming bubbles already streamed from her fingers, shooting toward the group below before spreading out and covering the tables, books and alcoves. The candles in the room went out as the spheres dispersed thick, clammy fog throughout the chamber. Immediately, Ami could hear spooked cries from below.

"We are under attack!"

"Guard the prisoner!"

The blue-haired girl, who had no trouble seeing through her own spell, teleported to a new position straight above Snyder. This turned out to be a wise decision, as mere moments later, a hail of prayer strips, not unlike the ones that Rei used, shot through the air where she had just been. The thrown wards did appear to pack some serious power, as they carved channels of clear air with the diameter of a pumpkin through the fog as they flew. Ami didn't have time to admire the monks' prowess though. From her vantage point, she could see the acolyte's red bowl cut from above, with the black ponytail of the woman right behind him. With her back to the wall, the bounty hunter was using the redhead as a human shield and had drawn her sword, pressing its edge against his Adam's apple. Snyder was trying very hard not to swallow.

"Show yourself!" one of the male bounty hunters bellowed. The leather-clad one was holding a crackling fireball in his hands and squinting into the fog in a near panic, while the monks were fanning out in a circular search pattern. Ami's priority was getting Snyder to safety, and the woman with the red-striped face was her main

obstacle right now. Taking a deep breath, the blue-haired girl concentrated. The greatest danger was the blade threatening to cut the acolyte's throat at the merest hint of trouble. The weapon had to be removed first. It was a longsword, so its tip was protruding beyond Snyder's neck and shoulders a fair bit. Ami's heart beat thunderously. She had to handle this correctly, or Snyder would pay the price for it.

"Open the windows! Get this fog out of here," someone in the murk below bellowed, and a few monks broke from their search to follow the instructions.

With a faint gurgle, a giant hand made of water shimmered into existence and swatted at the exposed bit of the weapon threatening Snyder's life, the part that was furthest away from his captor's hand. The woman's eyes went round in surprise at the sudden jolt, and the force of the blow slapped the blade away. She was too well-trained to lose hold of the weapon completely, though. Aghast, the acolyte saw the sharp edge approach his neck, too fast to be a mere return to its previous position, and let out a whimper. Metal clanged as Ami's own blade stabbed vertically down from above, right in front of the Acolyte's face, stopping the enemy's swing. The crossed blades hovered right in front of the shivering man's neck. Baffled, the tattooed tilted her head back to look up and search for the source of the sword. She gasped as she came face to face with burning red eyes that belonged to a black-and-gold dressed girl who was hanging head-first in the air and was throwing her a chilling glare. An instant later, something huge and wet slammed into the bounty hunter from the side, sending her and her hostage sprawling onto the ground.

"Sorry about that," the woman heard a soft voice through the fog, but before she could pull herself back to her feet and collect her fallen weapon, something huge and transparent lunged at her from out of the murk. With a strangled cry, she rolled out of the thing's path. Her armour made loud scraping noises as she slid over the stone floor. Slightly dazed, she sat up, and it took all her discipline to not freeze up as she got the first good glimpse at her attacker. A giant hand made of water burst from the rolling clouds, moving its fingers like spider legs as it scuttled toward her. When it had picked

up enough speed, it balled into a fist and lunged. Not being able to dodge in time, the black-haired woman closed her eyes and clenched her teeth, her entire body tensing up as she awaited the brutal impact. Nothing happened. Opening her eyes in surprise, she saw that the giant fist was floating within arm's reach, no longer advancing. Through its wavering form and obscured by the fog, she could just make out the hazy silhouette of the black-clad girl bending down over the equally hazy outline of that traitor apostate. With a snarl, she jumped to her feet - only for the fist to flick a finger at her, catching her in the chest with its index finger. The hard blow lifted her off of her feet and sent her flying backward in an arc, and she crashed into a bookshelf that rained its content onto her. Each book seemed to make a different pinging noise as it struck her armour, and something blue flashed in the mist, disappearing with the enemy shapes. The traitor scum had escaped!

Back in the safe confines of the dungeon's common room - the private one in the section of the ship that was off-limits to the warlocks and goblins - Ami was pressing a green-glowing hand to Snyder's face, channelling necromantic magic to mend his split lip. "What happened? Who were those people?"

"Ah well, I'm afraid they were members of the Silver Hawks," the redhead said, prodding his healed skin experimentally.

"The Silver Hawks? And they were after you? That's just great," Cathy said in a tone that revealed that it was anything but.

"Indeed. I didn't think we would end up on their list. I assume our latest encounter with the fairies was the straw that broke the camel's back," Jered said, twirling the handcuffs he had freed Snyder from around one finger.

"Would anyone care to tell us what the 'Silver Hawks' are?" Jadeite asked with a significant glance at Mercury, whose face showed the same incomprehension that he felt. The curly-haired blond crossed his arms in irritation as he waited for an explanation.

"Oh, right, sometimes I forget that you two aren't aware of stuff that

is common knowledge here," the wavy-haired man said. "In short, they are an organisation of bounty hunters that operates internationally," he explained.

"And most of them are mercenary scum," Cathy added.

"Their methods can be unsavoury," Jered elaborated. "Don't make the mistake of thinking of them as something as structured as a guild. They are not. It is more like a service that members can opt into for an annual fee, no questions asked. They hire wizards to search for the locations of wanted criminals, and if they find them, they pass on the information to members in the area so they can attempt a capture."

"Ahem. The important part is that they go after lucrative high-profile targets that the Crown has taken a special interest in," Snyder explained. "It would be too much of a hassle to search for every wanted criminal. The disturbing implication is that we have made it onto that exclusive list. Not only does this mean that someone high up is willing to pay a lot just to ask us some very pointed questions, it will also add considerable risk to our future operations in the surface lands."

"So now you are on a list of special enemies of the state? I'm so sorry. I never wanted that," Ami apologised, looking at the ground.

"Don't worry about it. What's done is done, and you were only doing what you thought was best," Cathy reassured the teenager. "However," her tone became sharper, "what were you thinking, going after Snyder alone? Within an entire monastery full of monks, no less! You can't just go out and risk your life like that! Jadeite could have handled this!"

"But they were hurting him right that moment!" Ami protested. Logically speaking, she knew that the woman was right, of course. "I'm sorry, but I couldn't just stand by idly and watch."

"And I am extremely grateful for that," Snyder butted in while Cathy was taking a deep breath to prepare chastising the blue-haired girl some more. "Additionally, I think you may be interested in the results of my investigation. The monks of Thrice-Martyred Theobald are

renowned for their exploits fighting the occasional vampire that pops up. I had the opportunity to study some of their more accessible tomes on that particular kind of undead."

Ami's face brightened as she turned to look at him directly. "Really? That's great! What can we use?" Her palmtop appeared before her, snapping open seemingly on its own.

"I will get to that. Let me begin with stating that there are many different rumours about how to deal with vampires floating about, but only a few hold even a grain of truth. Take the ancient belief about garlic repelling vampires - it is completely baseless. They are not even physically able to smell plants. I can only assume that Keepers and vampire minions alike perpetuate and spread such rumours in order to leave aspiring vampire slayers ill-prepared for battle."

"Oh really? That tells us sooo much about how to get rid of the bloodsuckers," Cathy said drily.

Snyder cleared his throat. "Very well, I shall give you the summarised version, rather than going into the details. The most glaring weakness of the vampire is its inability to cross water, either by going above, below, or underneath it, and this extends even to teleportation. The exact size of the body of water required remains undetermined, but brooks have been known to give vampires pause."

"This does explain why Zarekos and his brood aren't raiding the surrounding continents," Jered pondered.

"Does this inability extend to Keeper transport, and do they have a way to get around it?" Ami asked while the keys on her computer's keyboard clattered.

"Unknown, and yes," Snyder said. "Vampires are able to transform into a creature that seems alive, having the choice between either a bat or a wolf. Singular. They cannot turn into a swarm for this purpose. In this state of fake vitality, water poses no barrier for them, but they are unable to use their abilities until they revert to their true form."

"Not the most impressive opponents, those animals," Cathy said. "I guess you will be building all your dungeon hearts in a pool from now on, right?" She winked at Ami, who nodded absently, all business as she continued taking notes.

"A secondary weakness is direct sunlight," Snyder said.

"It turns them into ash?" Ami asked, not being entirely unfamiliar with her world's vampire stories.

The acolyte looked at her oddly. "If only it was that easy. It does not affect them directly, but a vampire that is killed while exposed to daylight does not revive. That's why vampires generally don't come out during the day."

"Oh. But they could if they wanted to?" Ami's mind raced. "Still, that could be useful if we could capture and contain them for later disposal, rather than destroying them outright."

Snyder thought about this for a moment. "Assuming that you can find a way to contain something that can't be rendered unconscious, can rip through steel with its claws, escape through the gap by transforming into something small, teleport away, or commit suicide as a way to escape, yes. It is a theoretical possibility."

"Um, there is no direct sunlight on the Avatar Islands any more," Cathy pointed out, "only fiery clouds all day and all night."

"Oh, yes. That had not occurred to me." Ami faced the acolyte again. "Um, how well does artificial sunlight work?"

"Artificial sunlight?" Snyder looked at Ami as if she had just grown a second head. "You can't make artificial sunlight. If it doesn't come from the sun, it's not sunlight. I thought this would be self-evident."

"Well, I had thought it might be a specific frequency or wavelength within the spectrum that..." she trailed of when she saw the look of blank incomprehension on the locals' faces.

"Magic *does not work that way*," the acolyte said slowly, as if speaking to a child. "Sunlight works because it is such a strong symbol of the Light gods that They can channel a minuscule amount

of Their radiance through the sunshine. There is nothing special about the light itself."

"Oh."

"That is how the monks would go about permanently destroying a vampire, too. Channel some of the Light's power into the finishing blow. It doesn't even have to be a real spell, only the fact that the energy is derived from the Light gods counts." The Acolyte scratched his head nervously. "Hypothetically speaking, even I could permanently destroy a vampire. Theoretically. Not that I'm volunteering to go near one of those things. They are terrifying."

"I understand. Are there any other weaknesses that I should know about?"

"Unfortunately, there is only one other. No vampire on record has ever returned from the seventh death inflicted in a single night," Snyder reported dutifully.

"Hmm." Ami stared at her screen. "Where do vampires rise again when they die? From the battle I remember," she tensed at the memories, "the bodies just turned to darkness and disappeared, and the vampires returned a while later from somewhere."

"I- I don't know. The monks had not considered the problem from that angle, I think. They do have the ability to easily make death stick on the first try, after all."

"Very good. That sounds like something that would be well worth investigating," Jadeite said with a nasty grin. *And so is finding out just how much I can make her blush just by talking to her,* he thought as he watched Mercury's cheeks colour faintly.

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Seaworthy

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Similar to mushrooms forming a fairy ring, tall iron cylinders stood in a circle, clicking faintly as the cogs within their upper sections turned like clockwork, slowly screwing the huge crucibles into the vaulting ceiling of the glittering cavern. Furiously glowing heating coils wound around each of the eight furnaces, banishing the shadows with their orange light. To the wavy-haired man standing on the round platform within the centre of the circle, it appeared as if it was raining inside the cave. Droplets of melt water fell like gleaming threads of rain, splashing onto to the stone ground and merging into tiny reddish-shimmering runlets.

Even if Jered had been inclined to pay attention to the drumming of the precipitation on the umbrella-like roof keeping his position dry, he wouldn't have worried about the stability of the place. A grid of finger-deep trenches hewn into the even floor collected the water and channelled it away, proving that the waning of the ice under the radiated heat was expected and accounted for. Darker structures and winding cables lurked within the glittering material that formed the ceiling, and they constituted the framework maintaining the integrity of this room, ice or no ice. No, the weasel-featured man had entirely unrelated problems. Sweat gleamed on his brow as he hurried between the eight control consoles positioned symmetrically around the edge of the platform, each one bristling with levers and controls. Jered glanced back at the open Mercury computer enthroned on a pedestal at the very centre of the platform, and yanked on the lever indicated in red on the palmtop's display. He didn't even notice the coils around the furnace facing the desk dim slightly in reaction, because a beep from Mercury's infernal contraption drew his gaze. He took a look at the new screen, which showed a sequence of three buttons flashing repeatedly, along with a large number three. A red seven as big as his head emblazoned the console he was standing in front of, so he dashed across the platform to the opposite side. Four quick steps carried him to the correct control panel, and he hit the indicated keys so hard that the

foremost knuckle of his index finger whitened. "It *always* has to be the one farthest away, hasn't it?" he lamented as a trill from the computer alerted him to the next set of parameters that needed adjustment. "Oh, come *on*!"

Before he could trip over his own feet making a dash for the indicated console, he felt a short burst of displaced air cool his sweaty skin, the movement out of place in the stale atmosphere of the chamber. "On it," a soft voice reassured him, and as he looked to his side, he saw that Mercury had transported herself onto the platform. The indicated levers creaked into position, moving despite nobody being near them.

"Oh. Hi Mercury. Thanks. I wish I could do that. Less running around."

The blue-haired girl smiled, keeping an eye on the controls. "No, thank *you* for keeping an eye on the gem production. Isn't it giving you too much trouble?" she asked, noticing that the green-dressed man was gasping for breath.

"No, it's fine," Jered waved her concerns away. "I can handle it. It's good training after sitting around so much, and that thing's making all the decisions anyway." He indicated the Mercury computer, pointing with his thumb over his shoulder. The device was still beeping in what seemed like random intervals, but Ami was well on top of the work. Controls clicked into position and buttons depressed themselves almost as soon as they appeared on the screen.

"No problems with the program I wrote? I can change the settings so it supervises fewer of the crucibles, if eight is too much." She had written a program that simulated her furnace and its controls, and with the aid of the ancient device's sensor suite, it could even measure the temperature within one of the crucibles and list the appropriate actions to maintain it. Expanding the software so that it could oversee a variable amount of the gem-growing machines had taken only minor adjustments. There shouldn't be any problems, but Ami was still feeling ill-at-ease as she stared at the computer sitting underneath a protective glass shell. *I don't like being separated from it,* she decided after a moment of reflection, during which she continued following the instructions appearing on the screen.

"No, I can handle it," Jered promised, his breath going easier now that he had been able to rest for a moment. All around, the controls clicked into place without his contribution. "We'll need all the wealth we can possibly get. I'll have to remember to bring something to drink next time, though." A bottle of water appeared out of thin air, hovering next to him. The lanky man plucked it from its spot with a rapid motion and poured the cool liquid down his throat. "Thanks! You are the most considerate Keeper ever! Say, how's Cathy doing with your goblins?"

"All right, listen up!" The blonde soldier stood at the front of what looked like a shabby classroom, putting her arms akimbo. The tall woman was wearing a breastplate over a blue shirt and long trousers of equal colour, having foregone the usual Sailor Mercury uniform. This could have had something to do with the fact that she was tall, the goblins were short, and the uniform's pleated skirt even shorter. The green creatures were giving her their undivided attention, for lack of other options. When Cathy wanted a captive audience, she got one. Chains rattled from time to time as the trussed-up greenskins sitting at the rows of wooden benches shifted or tested their restraints.

"Why we tied up? Did nothing wrong!" a large-eyed member of their species complained from the front row, looking like a caterpillar because of all the chains wrapped around him.

"So you can't do anything but pay attention," the blonde explained. "I don't want to deal with this all day."

"And neither do I," a grumpy-looking warlock standing next to the blonde grumbled. He was wearing a purple and black robe of the simple, sloppy cut that betrayed it as a quick conjuration, rather than a competent tailor's work. His haggard, sparsely-bearded cheeks kept quivering, as if he was constantly moving his tongue around in his mouth. With an irritated glance at the woman to his right, who would be just as tall as him if he straightened his pose instead of slouching like a troll, he asked "Why don't you do this yourself? I know you can cast some magic! This is keeping me from my valuable research!"

"Because the stupid spell doesn't create a chest piece," Cathy pointed out acidly.

"As if anybody here would mind," the warlock said with a leer at the blonde's assets. "You wouldn't, right?" He addressed the goblins, who nodded in confusion. They didn't know what the warlock was talking about, but it seemed smart to agree with someone who could potentially turn you into a toad at a whim.

"Shut up and get to it," the female soldier commanded, gesturing imperiously toward the wall of green faces.

The warlock rolled reddish eyes up toward the skies and raised his hands, muttering, "Why me?"

"Because Mercury found your dissertation very substandard, that's why," Cathy replied to the rhetorical question with undisguised relish.

"Yes, yes, yes. Mess up once and you get stuck teaching goblins," the warlock muttered into his beard. Louder, he said "All right. Now listen up you miserable wastes of flesh! I'm going to show you something that you are supposed to learn! The sooner you get it right, the sooner this farce will be over, so use those tiny little brains of yours for a change! This is a simple spellcasting routine. It's so simple that even someone like you could do it. Now observe!"

Cathy jumped aside when orange flames flared up around the warlocks feet and licked at her legs before drawing in close to the man and turning into quicksilver-like streamers that snaked their way up his limbs, leaving metal greaves in their wake. They slithered around his waist, condensing into a loincloth held by a chain, and continued creeping upward until they coalesced into enormous, spiked pauldrons. Chain links connected both pieces of shoulder armour together, with a thicker metal disc right in the centre like an amulet. The magician's hand closed around the haft of a large, sharp-looking scythe, whose blade gleamed because of the fading sparks. Proudly, the warlock struck a pose, subjecting everyone in the room to his pasty white chest. An eye blink later, the haggard man staggered and put a metal-clad foot forward to better balance the weight of the scythe, which was getting too much for his spindly

arms. Derisive snickering came from the benches, revealing the goblins' opinion of the display. "Kruk think Kruk could break stick man in half! Stick man thinner than Kruk!"

"Is that so?" The warlock, whose hairless skin was starting to show goosebumps from the frigid dungeon air, furrowed his bushy eyebrows as he glared at the heckler. "Why don't you come forward and show us all how well you have internalised the lesson?" The man dropped the scythe and stretched out his hand, wriggling spidery fingers at the small greenskin in question. Chains rattled as they fell loose and pooled around the child-sized goblin, who folded his triangular ears close to his head at the display. "Well, what are you waiting for? Come up here! And you, stop grinning," he hissed at Cathy, who was leaning against the wall, blue eyes gleaming with amusement.

Kruk dragged his feet as he shuffled toward the front like a man condemned. Under the expert instruction of the warlock, it didn't take the green creature long to start up the first flames. With a loud screech, the goblin started running around in a circle, spreading the scent of scorched meat and kicking his feet up high to extinguish his burning toes.

"A good start," the black-bearded magician commented, unperturbed by the ash-coloured smoke drifting past him. "Next!"

"I must say that I remain entirely unconvinced that this is a wise idea," Snyder protested as his hands glowed white. "It feels somewhat blasphemous, to be completely honest."

Ami's stomach churned, and she felt the strong urge to recoil from the display of holy magic, but instead, she leaned in even closer, until her nose nearly touched the tip of the worried-looking acolyte's fingers. The data she was recording with her visor was well worth it, even if Jered still had her computer. She would properly analyse it later. "Snyder, believe me, I'm very grateful for what you are doing. All I want to do is see if I can't replicate the anti-vampire sunlight effect somehow. I don't think the Light gods would object to that. Besides, healing magic is fascinating." *If I just managed to*

understand it before I got home, it could revolutionise medicine! But that's still in the future.

"I understand that," the redhead said, letting out a long sigh. "Unfortunately, showing off the secrets of the Light gods to a Keeper, even if it is you, is so completely against everything I was taught since my earliest childhood that I can't help feeling that I'm betraying the Light."

Ami retreated, deactivating the visor, and the transparent blue sheet withdraw back into her earring. "I'm sorry about that. I didn't intend to make you uncomfortable."

"It is all right, I was not holding it against you," Snyder said as he leaned back, sinking deeper into his armchair as his hands stopped glowing. "Did you learn anything useful, at least?"

Ami adjusted the collar of her black jacket as she wandered up and down, her footsteps making soft thuds on the thick carpet. "The influence of the Light gods, if I identified it correctly, bears a very strong resemblance to what Jadeite calls 'life energy'," she said, sounding thoughtful. Noticing the acolyte's raised eyebrow, she continued. "They are clearly different things, but seem to share many properties. I can't really explain it without going into the technical details, and that wouldn't help you understand, I'm afraid."

"I'll take your word for it, then," Snyder agreed, creasing the white cloth of his robe absently as he kneaded it with his fingers. "By the way, how is your hand now that the arm is out of its sling?"

Ami raised the slender limb in question from her side, showing the pale, pinkish new skin that covered the limply-flopping fingers. "Itchy," she said, "aside from that, I can't feel or move anything."

"That's a good sign," the acolyte said warmly, "the itching means that the nerves are regenerating. You should regain full control of it in a few days time, hopefully."

The blue-haired girl's face lit up with delight, the red glow of her eyes receding until they shimmered merely violet. "I'm so happy about that! I feared that it might never get to use it again!"

Seen from above, Ami's gleaming iceberg resembled modern ships with its elongated cigar shape. Even with the thorn-like spikes covering its surface like pox, it was an island of calm in the storm-grey ocean, its flanks unperturbed by the house-sized waves that the howling storm whipped them with. A double row of high, three-bladed windmills stretched from the middle of the frozen vessel to almost the tip of its bow, which ploughed through the foamy sea. The rapidly-spinning generators whirred and buzzed, their tall iron frames producing resonating groans whenever a stronger gust bent the struts.

At about the rear third of the mobile dungeon, a high ridge of ice ran perpendicularly to the ship's length, straight as an arrow. The artificial mountain was the highest point of the iceberg, towering twice as high as the windmills. Despite appearances, Ami hadn't fallen back on Jadeite's abilities to raise this hill just so she could place the bridge of the ship in it. While the metre-thick window of polished ice that formed the entire front side of the room offered an amazing view of the surroundings, that was but a side benefit. The young Keeper turned away from her reflection on the clear surface. Her silhouette was nothing but a black shape backlit by the leaden grey of the windswept clouds as she faced the other being in the room, crossed her arms, and focused the gaze of her red-glowing eyes on the small figure. "No difficulties, Captain?" Lightning flashed behind her, its light penetrating deeply into the ice and making it glow from within.

"N-no, Mistress! Gazok good captain! Gazok keeps ship going great!" The large goblin couldn't decide whether he should prostrate himself before the Keeper or salute stiffly, so he tried to do both. He dropped to his knees in front of the blue-haired girl and brought his green hand up to his oversized captain's hat so vehemently that he nearly knocked the white garment off of his head, and it ended up dangling from his left ear.

"Rise," Ami said gently, trying not to laugh. "You don't have to do that. Keep up the good work." The captain's position was largely ornamental, and so it was a great motivational tool to rouse the goblins' ambition. By making it the grand prize of a regular fighting

tournament, she could get her little employees to actually give their all when training. Sure, the winner got to lord his authority over the other goblins, but his actual duties were those of a lookout. Even the huge steering wheel made of polished wood set into a console in front of the captain's chair would do nothing but alert her to someone turning it. While irresponsible on the surface, such a system did not actually have any drawbacks. Once a block of ice weighing millions of metric tons was moving in a certain direction, it tended to keep going that way. Slowing it down would take just as much time as accelerating it, and its turn radius could be measured in kilometres.

Ami had already resigned herself to the fact that the warship would never be able to approach a coast closer than several dozen kilometres due to its limited manoeuvrability. Going any closer risked grounding it. Sure, the ship did have electrical engines and rudders to correct its course, but they were near negligible when compared to the real power driving the vessel forward: the very ridge this room was located in. The protruding mass of ice acted like a sail that caught the force of the storm, pushing the rest of the iceberg forward. Ami remembered the struggle to arrange for the wind to do what she wanted only too well. The manifestation of the corruption seemed to have a mind of its own, slipping out of her attempts to control it again and again. At times, it had felt as if she was trying to contain a blob of liquid quicksilver with nothing but a net. She had not given up though, spending hours and hours analysing the data with dogged persistence, and setting up new experiments. In the end, she had succeeded, relinquishing some control over one aspect of the corruption to determine the storm's direction instead. In exchange for harnessing the wind, the effects of the corruption would once again cause any plants on the surface to slowly wither and die, and even humans and animals would become frail and sickened if they stayed in the area for too long. Given that Ami's dungeon was located within an iceberg that couldn't sustain life in the first place, she didn't think that she came any worse out of this trade. Even better, in the process, she had learned new information that she could use to upgrade her next dungeon heart, making the corruption more manageable. She would show it! Oh yes, she would!

Had Ami been a more typical example of the mad scientist kind, she might have started laughing out maniacally at this point. Some of her emotion must have show on her face though, because when she finished setting a course for the Avatar Island, grinning widely, only an eye and a triangular ear were peeking out from behind the captain's seat, peering nervously in her direction. Ami coughed into her hand in embarrassment, and her eyes met the goblin's, shining like red searchlights. "Carry on," she instructed, before disappearing from his sight.

Some of the outfits Ami had bought in the dark elf city were rather daring, but the current one did make a good swimsuit, she thought while drifting on her back in the rectangular swimming pool. How she had missed swimming! Enjoying the feel of the warm water against her skin, she paddled experimentally with her injured arm, feeling no discomfort. She *had* put on some muscle while training for the Reaper duel, she observed critically. That had to be the reason why the strapless one-piece suit fit like a second skin, its dark violet fabric barely shifting even during her most energetic movements, and despite showing much more leg and back than she was used to. It had been a good purchase, after all. As she relaxed, she became suddenly aware of a grey-clad form that shimmered into existence above the pool, its blonde reflection wavering on the calm water.

"Mercury? Jered told me you were here!"

Startled, Ami sat up, splashing and causing ripples as she did. "Jadeite!"

The curly-haired blond's eyebrows rose as he took in her slender form, causing Ami to become suddenly aware of the skimpiness of her outfit, and she felt her cheeks heat up. In an instant, she was at the edge of the pool, her sudden absence leaving a hole in the water that immediately filled in.

"Am I interrupting your bath?" the dark general asked when he saw the girl face away from him, towelling herself off with a long piece of deep purple cloth that had suddenly appeared in her hands.

"No, no, it's fine, I was nearly done," Ami said, turning around when she heard his boots alight on the wet floor tiles nearby. She barely resisted the urge to cover her chest with her arms when a faint breeze cooled her humid skin, making her uncomfortably aware of each square centimetre that the garment exposed. *Get a grip on yourself! Yes, it's a swimsuit, but you are entirely decent. It's something the dark elves would even wear normally. There's nothing to worry about! In addition, he has already seen much more of you!* That last thought did nothing to ease her mind however, and her blush deepened. "What do you need me for?"

"Well, I wanted to discuss my plan for recapturing the fairies with you. Do you have a secure facility yet?" Jadeite asked, folding his arms behind his back.

"No, the prison design isn't translated to the crystal system yet," Ami said as she finished tying the towel around her waist and raised her gaze from the floor, looking at Jadeite directly. The dark general was facing away from her, but as if feeling her gaze, he turned around. The corners of his lips curved downward, and a frightening scowl flitted momentarily over his angular features as his eyes wandered over her form. Ami became acutely aware of her heartbeat as her blood seemed to freeze. *What was that? Does he dislike what he sees?* Now that was an unreasonably frightening idea for the timid girl. "Is- is something wrong?"

"What? No! With that towel around your hips, the outfit just reminded me of Beryl's dress," Jadeite said in a dismissive tone, before elaborating. "Similar colour, similar cut. She was always wearing that thing, as if it was the only gown she had. It was so tight that I doubt she could even walk in it!"

Relief flooded Ami's mind, and she quietly resolved to avoid purple from now on. Then she noticed how the taller man was balling his white-gloved hands into fists despite his impassive expression, and felt herself compelled to step closer.

"You really hate her," she observed quietly.

"Yes," the dark general hissed through clenched teeth. Upon seeing Ami's wide-eyed stare, he explained hotly, "It's not only because she

just threw me away after all my years of loyal service. It's also *what* she did to me! Have you ever considered what the Eternal Sleep punishment is like?" he asked, pressing his lips together as his features hardened.

Ami shook her head, dislodging a few droplets of water from her wet hair. They ran down her neck, over her collarbone, and deeper. The cold trace of the liquid made her uncomfortably aware of the near-indecent plunge of her swimsuit's neckline, but judging from Jadeite's clouded expression, his thoughts were entirely elsewhere. "I haven't," she admitted honestly.

"It's not just imprisonment," the dark general said, venom in his voice. "It's total sensory deprivation. It traps you in black nothingness, unable to feel, hear, see, or smell anything, with nothing to keep you entertained but yourself! Nothing!"

"That's terrible!" Ami gasped, paling as she considered the implications, but Jadeite was not done yet.

In a quieter tone of voice, he continued, "All you can do is wait, wait until you lose your sanity, which you know all the time you will, but you also know that it won't be an escape, because the crystal will drag you back and keep you hale and functioning so it happens over and over again, forever and ever and eve-" The dark general's rant cut off when he felt slender arms encircle him, followed by a warmth against his chest as Mercury pressed herself against him, pulling him into a comforting hug. Looking down, he expected to see a mop of blue hair, but instead, he met large reddish-blue eyes that bristled with tears.

"I didn't know," Ami said gently. "That must have been terrible. It's... it sounds right in line with something Azzathra would do, just more subtle," she continued, anger creeping into her voice.

The sudden, close contact was not something Jadeite was used to, but he *did* feel better, come to think of it. At a loss of words, he remained silent for several heartbeats, frozen in the girl's gaze like a deer in the headlights. "Mercury, you..." he said finally.

"Yes?" Ami answered, her heart beating rapidly.

"...you are getting my uniform wet," he concluded, presenting a moist glove that had rested on the damp cloth near Ami's waist as evidence. How it had gotten there in the first place, he had no idea. The reaction was instantaneous, though. He saw the teenagers pupils shrink as she realized exactly what she was doing, and with a leap that made him think she might have accidentally teleported, she stood a few steps away from him, her face sporting a blush that would have made a tomato proud. She alternated between clasping her hands in front of herself and covering her mouth as she looked at the ground and stammered, "Oh, yes, sorry, I didn't want to- I mean, I did, but I didn't think of-"

Jadeite watched her, feeling mildly disappointed for some reason, when she suddenly fell quiet and her posture became more rigid. "Jadeite," she said, looking directly at the blond's angular face, with not a single hint of embarrassment remaining in her voice. In fact, it sounded deadly serious. "You weren't the only victim of that spell, were you?"

He shook his head. "Beryl would use it occasionally to make an example of someone."

"We need to save them." It was a declaration, not a suggestion.

"How? I haven't heard of someone breaking free of that spell before. Well, aside from me, and that was all Queen- "

"Metallia," they concluded together.

"Not a bad plan, really. Those who are still sane could be valuable assets," Jadeite said with interest as he thought things through, unaware that it was now Ami's turn to clench her fists as she wrestled with her conflicting emotions.

"I can't say I like begging Metallia for another boon," she said, following her statement with a deep sigh. "Still," her shoulders straightened, and she continued more firmly. "We *have* to help them. It would be too cruel to just leave them be. When I think back to when I was trapped with Azzathra, and imagine that there was someone who could have helped me and decided to do nothing - the thought is unbearable!"

"A sacrifice would go a long way in assuring the Great Ruler's cooperativeness," Jadeite prompted in a neutral tone of voice.

"I know." Ami paced up and down along the edge of the pool, no longer concerned with her relative lack of clothing as her bare feet splashed through the water. Jadeite followed her with his steel-blue eyes while she organised her thoughts, until she drew to a stop. There was one experiment she had wanted to perform for a while now, but whose dubious benefit - not to mention the ethical implications - had made her delay it indefinitely. Now, however, was a golden opportunity to incorporate it into her actions.

"Jadeite, I need small samples of life energy from as many different species as possible. Trolls, orcs, bile demons, fairies, humans, animals... not enough to be dangerous, but clearly labelled. Can you do this for me?"

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A Minor Complication

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Two male figures walked leisurely along a roofed balustrade that overlooked a neatly trimmed and designed garden. The duo differed as much in attitude as it differed in attire. While the elder of the two, clad in blue finery and wearing a golden crown, glanced frequently down at the marble fountains and bird baths sitting amidst the flower arrangements, his companion skulked close to the wall, keeping in the shadows cast by the rounded pillars upholding the roof.

"So you are telling me that Keeper Mercury has been spotted at the monastery of Thrice-Martyred Theobald, personally, to get one of her minions out of a dicey situation?" The white-haired man began, raising his voice to be heard over the tweeting sounds of newborn swallows fighting over a worm in their nest.

"Yes, your Majesty, if the reports of the White Hawks mercenaries are to be believed. Which they usually are," came the muffled answer from underneath the other man's dark hood. The masked spymaster kept his back very straight, and each of his steps was exactly as long as the previous one.

"She was able to appear and disappear at will. Does she have a dungeon in the area?" the wrinkly-faced king asked, tapping his gold ring worriedly against the white marble of the railing.

"I find this unlikely in the extreme. We already know that she is an accomplished sorceress and able to teleport on her own. Besides, if she had territory in the area, then she could have just removed her minion without ever getting close enough to put herself in danger."

"Unless she wanted us to believe that."

"A possibility, albeit an unlikely one. Besides, even if she had a dungeon there, the direct threat posed by her would be lower than usual."

"You will have to explain that to me," the king said as he turned to face his servant directly, demonstrating that he was giving him his full attention now. From the palace wing ahead, faint music drifted through the air while the dark-clad agent formulated his reply.

"I took the liberty to have my agents investigate the reports from Evercalm more closely," he said, and his monarch faltered in mid-step, spearing his spymaster with the stern gaze of his maroon eyes. "There is no need to be alarmed, your Majesty. Their actions went unnoticed by Queen Astrid's men. Even if some of their activities came to light, they would not be traceable back to us."

"Very well, I trust in your competence. I just hope I won't have to deal with that harpy throwing yet another tantrum in my old age," the king commented and resumed his regular pace.

The cowled man walking at his side grinned under the scarf hiding his face from the nose down, or at least, that was the impression that Albrecht got from the spy's tone of voice. "I'm afraid you aren't quite old enough to avoid living through the next one, my Liege. However, I am rather certain that it won't be related to any of *my* work. To get back on topic, my men conducted some interviews that brought to light some surprising findings."

"Beyond what Astrid deigned to share with us?" Albrecht asked, frowning.

"Definitely," the spymaster answered, ignoring his king's hushed mutterings about an angry old hag. "You will find it highly interesting to know that Keeper Mercury not only fought on the grounds of the town's temple, but entered the building itself."

Albrecht's eyebrows rose until they almost met the white curls of his wig. "She is powerful enough to withstand the Light? I find that extraordinarily difficult to believe!"

"Nevertheless, that is what the priest on duty at the time reported," his advisor insisted. "He did not recognise her as a Keeper, obviously. He ascribed her difficulty to enter the premises to his perception that she has demonic taint somewhere in her lineage, as far as four or five generations back."

"Has she?"

The spymaster shrugged. "There's not enough information to tell for sure. Judging by the fact that she has demonstrated both superhuman abilities and is still close enough to being human to fool a healer, the theory might well contain a grain of truth. In any case, the priest reports that she was thrown out after conferring with the Light for a while."

"Thrown out? Not destroyed? The Gods could have put her out of our collective misery!" the King barked.

"The Light wouldn't harm someone who came in peace," his advisor reminded the red-faced monarch matter-of-factly. "I find it more interesting that she felt desperate enough to even attempt something like this. I assume that this meeting was the reason for the Light's request to capture her if she surrenders, rather than killing her outright."

"Well, I suppose putting her on trial for her crimes and then properly executing her *would* be more just, at that," Albrecht said, creasing his brow as he thought. "That still doesn't explain why you'd think that one of her dungeons in the area would pose less risk than usual."

"I was getting to that. The Light Gods revealed that she has little interest in conquering or destroying the surface world. I speculate that this is what landed her in hot water with the dark gods in the first place."

"So she would be content to just remain underground, wallowing in decadence, if no external force were acting on her? That sounds too good to be true."

"Not exactly. The Light indicates that she would rather research or attack other Keepers if left to her own devices."

"Really? Doesn't bother anyone and likes to attack Keepers? Now if she only paid taxes on time, she'd almost be a model citizen," the king said, following his sentence up with a cough-like laugh. "Makes one think about replacing one of those more headstrong Barons,

no?"

The spymaster fished a leather-bound book out of his flowing grey robes and flipped it open to a bookmarked page, glancing at the writing from behind his mask. "She *did* offer to pay taxes to Baron Leopold in order to be left alone, if these notes are correct. However I would still advise against-"

"It was a jest!" the king blurted out angrily. "Of course I wouldn't want a Keeper vassal. Aside from it being a dangerous precedent, the corruption issue, and being a terrible idea in general, the diplomatic implications alone would be bad enough to give me nightmares!"

The masked man's tone never changed as he said "Questioning your decisions is not part of my duties, your Majesty."

Albrecht waved his right hand up and down as if swatting a fly, dismissing the comment. "Yes, yes, yes, always the impeccably dutiful stick-in-the-mud. Of course, that's what makes you so valuable."

The spymaster inclined his head, acknowledging the compliment. "Thank you. In any case, such a hypothetical endorsement of Keeper Mercury would be premature. Not only were the powers of the Light adamant on the fact that her research must be stopped, but it also seems that she has changed since their meeting."

"How so?" the King asked, lowering his voice at the sight of the open door leading to the crowded interior of the palace, where eavesdroppers would be able to hide behind long, crimson drapes and opulent armour stands.

"Keeper Mercury was a containable problem because she did not have the ability to make new dungeon hearts. Her recent actions, however, show that she has acquired this capability by now. As you well know, it is rather unlikely that she has somehow compressed several decades of research into just a few weeks. Which leaves..."

"...her having found a dark god to sponsor her, invalidating our previous knowledge, or rendering it dubious at best." Albrecht

finished, pulling his ermine coat tighter around himself as if the wind had become chillier. The music that drifted toward him from within the palace seemed to almost mock his mood with its cheerfulness. "Very well. I will take this into consideration." Cloth rustled like dry grass behind the king, and the spymaster was gone, leaving Albrecht to mingle with high society without the questions that the man's presence would have undoubtedly drawn.

Ami's plan to free the victims of Beryl's Eternal Sleep punishment had run into an unexpected snag. "Metallia isn't powerful enough to send them to me on her own?" Ami looked up from her tiny computer, blinking at Jadeite with wide eyes.

The dark general nodded once, touching his left hand to his elbow as he scratched his chin with his right. "Yes. You did mention that I arrived here through an existing temple to the dark gods. Our Great Ruler must have used the existing weakness in space to send me through."

Ami wrapped her arms around herself as she remembered the strange, hypnotic rainbow patterns playing over the pool of Malleus' temple. The eerie basin had looked deceptively beautiful, betraying nothing of all the stomach-turning sacrifices that had been performed in the richly-decorated room. Jadeite's theory that the quiet waters had been a gateway to the dark realms made an uncomfortable amount of sense. Despite the shadowy pool having been less than three metres deep, it had appeared like a bottomless abyss to her. "So you think I need a new temple?"

Jadeite nodded. "Or something equivalent. My portals will not work, I have no destination location to lock on to."

The blue-haired girl inclined her head as she thought, clenching her teeth. "The idea of opening an access point for the dark gods after going through all the trouble to get rid of the one in the dungeon hearts doesn't sit well with me."

Jadeite shrugged his shoulders, making the grey fabric of his uniform rustle. "As you wish. They are just trapped youma, anyway.

They would be useful, but we will manage without them."

Leaving them where they were would be the easy way out, Ami considered, and immediately felt guilty for even thinking about leaving them to their torment. "I'll have to consult with Snyder and the warlocks about this," Ami said, leaning back in her chair. "I know how Malleus created his temple, but the god to whom it was dedicated to no longer exists." She sighed and rubbed her eyes. "I don't know whether the design would still work, even if I translated it for the crystal type dungeon heart."

"Could you use a temple dedicated to a different dark god?" her dark general suggested. "We might be able to negotiate for the use of one."

Ami shook her head. "I wouldn't want to risk that, even if it could be done. I have had enough encounters with Azzathra to last for a lifetime." She shuddered and continued in a determined tone of voice "I need to maintain as much control over the situation as possible, and using a foreign temple is out of the question. I will investigate what I can do about this. Can you please begin gathering the various energy samples that we will need in the meantime?"

"Consider it done, Mercury." Jadeite bowed curtly, displaying a confident grin before dissolving into vertical black lines that disappeared from sight.

The air of the torch-lit natural cavern smelled of smoke and strong alcohol, but none of the figures sitting around the shabby wooden tables cared. At one of them that stood in the shadow of a towering stalagmite, bone dice clattered. An argument broke out over the results when a green-skinned troll insisted that the roll shouldn't count because the dice got stuck in a puddle of spilled beer. A thrown ceramic mug collided with his leathery forehead and exploded into a rain of shards, causing the humanoid to stagger backward. He glared at his attacker with his tiny black eyes before lunging over the table, his knotty fingers making a grab for the pinkish-skinned orc's neck. Mugs and glasses clattered to the floor as the white-haired defender's chair toppled backward, sending both

combatants rolling over the ground and through the shards, still wrestling with each other as they disappeared underneath a rickety table. Much jeering and cheering accompanied the battle while other creatures moved in closer to get a better look, and gold coins jingled as bets were made on the outcome.

The cheerful clamour was a welcome distraction for a certain curly-haired blond, who was playing a game of cards with a trio of other creatures. The strangest of the three was an orange-scaled lizard with a forked tongue, who somehow managed to hold its deck with its forepaws despite a lack of thumbs. To its right sat another troll, wrapped in shaggy furs, and the last gambler was an orc. A crooked grin appeared on the muscular female's face, showing off the blunt tusks in her lower jaw as she pulled a stack of gold coins closer to herself. None of the players paid the least attention to the fight, instead keeping their eyes on their opponents. Nobody trusted the others to not cheat if given half the opportunity. They were so enraptured with throwing suspicious glances at each other that they failed to spot the faint white glow that had appeared around the cards in their hands, snaking around the paper like colourless flame. A moment later, the trio's heads hit the worm-eaten wood of the table with loud thuds that were completely drowned out by the roaring of the crowd. Hiding his smile behind his own deck of cards, Jadeite faded out of sight, disappearing from the gambling den.

Ami leaned forward on her throne, her slender upper body framed by the aquamarine loop of the huge Mercury symbol that formed the back of the opulent seat, and fixated her crimson gaze on the elderly warlock standing in front of her. Lifting her chin from the hand it was resting on, she asked "And you are absolutely sure about that? Snyder, can you confirm this?"

The white-and-red robed acolyte standing to her left nodded slowly. "A place of worship sacred to a dead god would, in fact, not be dedicated to any particular one."

"Meaning that any of the dark gods could use it to reach out into the world at will?" The red glow in Ami's eyes intensified, demonstrating her displeasure at that frightening thought.

"Not exac-" "To the contrar-" Both Snyder and the warlock spoke up at the same time, pausing to throw irritated glances at each other. The redhead flinched under the taller magic user's glare, and took a step back, inviting the other to speak first.

The purple-robed man spoke in a harsh whisper. "The Gods may only act upon places and people within this world they have a claim on. Not unlike yourself, Keeper. The mere presence of a weak point between this world and the next is no sufficient." Snyder just nodded along, voicing no objections.

"I can act fine even outside of my dungeon," Ami protested. The inflection she used made it clear that she expected an explanation.

"Ah, but you are physically present in this plane and can therefore bring your power to bear directly," the warlock pointed out, holding his index finger up and wagging it left and right, as if lecturing a child. From the perspective of the white-bearded men, Ami probably still counted as one. "I can only theorize that, should one of the Gods manage to get here, Its limitations would be similarly lifted."

The blue-haired girl's face lost some colour as she contemplated the most likely results. As far as she knew, Metallia's much-diminished presence was not confined to the dark void that Azzathra and the other dark gods dwelt in. That information made her nervous and scared for her own world. "So you both agree that one dark god cannot act through a temple dedicated to a different one?"

"Yes." "That is so."

Ami sank deeper into her throne, falling silent. The black fabric of her right sleeve rustled as it brushed over the crystal edge of the armrest. "I do have a piece of evidence that does not fit into the picture," she said, sounding dubious. "When I was pleading with the dark gods to remove the plague they had placed on my minions, Azzathra *was* able to reach out and destroy Malleus' temple despite having no claim on it."

The warlock shifted his weight from one leg to the other, looking as if he was going to say something, but didn't quite dare to. His eyes went up to the large metal gauntlet affixed to the ice wall above

Mercury's throne and fit for the size of her water hand.

"Please speak," Ami said after watching him fidget for several seconds. "I am not going to punish anyone for telling me that I am wrong," she assured him, correctly guessing the source of her employee's unease.

"Indeed? Well, you, as the owner of the temple, did make your plea to all of the Dark Gods, correct? In that case, the place became available to all of them, if it had been unclaimed before. However, I am a bit at a loss to explain why none of the other Dark Gods would have prevented The Mighty Tyrant from wrecking the structure. They should have objected to him smashing their new toy, even if they never intended to use it."

"They did, I think." Ami remembered the angry, disembodied voices that had reverberated through the clammy air of the chamber, their indistinct words making the walls vibrate and plaster trickle from the ceiling. "I heard them argue about it, I think, but Azzathra came out on top."

"If I may venture a guess, the others may have backed down because the temple was not worth fighting over," Snyder pointed out when he noticed the faint beads of cold sweat that had appeared on Mercury's forehead. "It is not as if he can take on the entire other dark pantheon and win, or he would have already done so."

"That makes sense," Ami agreed. "However, I was under the impression that dedicating a temple to a dark god required the assistance of their priesthood and expensive rituals?" That was another memory from Malleus that had been thankfully dulled since her contact with the light gods, leaving nothing but impressions of blood, ominous chanting, ripping noises, and tortured screams, which were on their own already more than enough reason for the teenager to never think about what was involved voluntarily.

Perhaps her revulsion showed on her face, because the warlock raised a thin eyebrow as he answered, "That is more of a buy-in. Naturally, no Dark God would want to provide benefits to a Keeper who wasn't willing to commit to the God's cause, and prove it by investing quite a bit of wealth and effort into flattering the deity in

question." He revealed yellowed teeth as he grinned. "Of course, the clergy would put it into much more flowery and dignified terms if you asked them, but that's basically how it works. Right, acolyte?"

Snyder pouted as the dark mage sneered at him, but managed to bite back a sharp-tongued retort about how the Light didn't need to be bribed to provide help to the needy. Getting into a theological debate right now wouldn't help.

"All right." Having reached a decision, Ami stood up from her throne. With a plop of displaced air, a purple tome as thick as her arm appeared before her, hovering with no support. The metal hinges of its covers creaked as it opened, paper rustling as pages flipped themselves. The blue-haired girl inspected the script in front of her, looking for a specific passage before placing a cloth bookmark. "Take this," she said to the curious warlock while the book slammed shut and glided toward him. "At the bookmarked section, you will find instructions on how to build a temple. I need it redesigned so that it will work with gold-based dungeon hearts. Please get together with the teams working on doing the same for the jail and hatchery rooms, their progress should be applicable to this problem, too."

The warlock caught the book easily and bowed. "Of course, Keeper. You have found religion, then? Probably wise in the long run." He turned away, his long robe sweeping over the mirrored floor as he walked toward the exit, past the slender ice pillars framing Merury's throne room.

Snyder's lips turned into a thin line as he watched the bowed warlock's retreating back until he was out of hearing distance. Stepping closer to Mercury's throne, he said in a frosty tone of voice, "He is right, is he not? You are actually going to worship that Metallia fiend seriously!"

Ami wilted under his accusing stare. "That's not true! I just want to use her to my benefit!"

"That's *exactly* why Keepers worship dark gods! You are going down a dangerous path. Jadeite is a terrible influence on you! Turn back while you still can!"

The acolyte's passionate words seemed to cut directly into Ami's heart, resonating with her own fears. She felt a brief flare of anger at his accusation of Jadeite, but had to admit to herself that it was a justified one. The dark general, despite what she felt for him, was not a good person. Breaking eye contact, she looked at the ground. "I have to do this. There are people suffering whom nobody can help but me." The blue-haired girl didn't even notice that she had started to think of the trapped youma as people, having spent so much time surrounded by even worse monsters. "I just have to free them. Nobody else will!"

Snyder looked as if he had just bitten into a lemon. "Very well. I cannot find fault with your motivation or stop you, only beg you to find a better way instead. Your good intentions may well lead us all to ruin." Having spoken his words of warning, he turned on his heel and followed the warlock outside, leaving Ami to brood by herself.

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Sacrifice

Originally on 2010-04-12T01:01:00

Stars and planets circled on their orbits in a simulation of the night sky. It occupied the illusory space that extended further than there was room underneath the roof of Nephrite's ill-lighted mansion. The dark general stood on the ground with closed eyes as a thin beam of light from the largest celestial object made contact with his forehead. The luminescent sphere pulsed in bluish-grey colours while images flashed through the brown-haired general's mind. The stars, he knew, could provide answers to many questions, but would not necessarily do so. In addition, the answers were often cryptic, and it was up to the astrologer to interpret them. Take, for example, the current image that had appeared in response to his request to see the cause behind Jadeite's freedom. The planets of the solar system turned in his mind, and the view zoomed in on the tiny planet that was closest to the sun, but wreathed in darkness despite its proximity to the brightly-shining star. How odd. What could it mean? Was this the outsiders' stronghold? Their world of origin? Or was the image meant symbolically? Maybe he should be more specific with his questions. "The stars know everything! Show me how Jadeite was freed from Eternal Sleep!"

The mirage of a star-filled sky wavered under the dark general's bellowed command, rearranging into different constellations. This time, he had no trouble interpreting the resulting image. A short-looking girl in blue garb pushed her hand right through the crystal of his fellow dark general's prison, remained still for a while, then stepped back, and Jadeite flopped onto the floor before her. Her most striking feature were the crimson-glowing eyes. Maybe he should focus his inquiries on her instead? The man intoned more incantations, but the answers he got from the stars were confusing, to say the least. It was as if the sorceress - for what else could she be? - had powerful protections that veiled her past and future from his gaze. But what about her associates? Closing his eyes as the column of light struck his forehead once more, Nephrite meditated. Suddenly, his eyelids opened, showing pupils widened in surprise.

Many of the faces he had seen had been complete unknowns, but he had recognised two of them all too well. The sailor senshi in question had foiled too many of his plans for his liking. Queen Beryl would want to hear about this immediately!

"Zoisite, you failed to gather the energy you promised to acquire for our Great Ruler. Not only that, but you allowed another sailor senshi to join the rest of the pests. How do you explain these blunders?" Queen Beryl's orange eyes narrowed into slits as she glared at the effeminate man.

Put on the spot, the dark general sweated, while the courtiers wrapped in shadow started whispering, like sharks that smelled blood in the water. "A temporary setback. Just give me more time! I already have a new plan!"

"Will *this* one consist of something more elaborate than having a youma run through the city and drain random passers-by?" a male voice mocked from behind him as a long-haired figure stepped into the circle of pale light surrounding Beryl's monstrosity of a throne, smirking.

Zoisite let out a low growl. "Shut up, Nephrite! At least I wasn't laid low by some human *food* for days. My plan would have worked too if the senshi hadn't been in the area!"

Nephrite walked to the younger general's side, facing Beryl and completely ignoring the younger man. In a gesture designed to infuriate his rival even more, he nonchalantly tossed his brown hair back over his shoulder with a brush of his left hand before lowering his upper body in a shallow and suave bow to his ruler.

"Nephrite." The red-haired woman said, acknowledging his presence in a cold tone that indicated that she was merely tolerating him right now.

"My Queen, I have completed my current objective. Successfully, I might add," he said, looking at the shorter dark general to his right from the corner of his eyes. Zoisite immediately understood the

meaning of the short glance, which amounted to an implicit "not like someone else here." As the effeminate general had no idea what Nephrite's current assignment was, he could do nothing but seethe silently and pout.

"Oh?" The evil queen drawled, waving her long fingernails above the gleaming black surface of her crystal ball. "Good. Report to me in private. Zoisite!" Her glare re-appeared as she returned her attention to the younger general. "I will leave the energy collection to you. Do not fail me." Like an immaterial ghost, Beryl sank down through the bluish-purple stone that formed her throne, leaving no doubt that the audience was over. With a triumphant chuckle, Nephrite watched his rival grit his teeth and disappear, filling the air where he had been with an entirely needless swirl of flower petals. No doubt to find and whine to Kunzite. Oh, but it felt good to get under the little snake's skin, especially now that he had usurped Nephrite's position. Still grinning, the dark general faded from the room, following his queen.

"And she's tall and strong and she just tackled the youma without even knowing she was a sailor senshi first," Ami read from the sheet of note paper covered in Usagi's enthusiastic but near-illegible scrawl. The crystal ball resting on the desk in front of her winked out in a carefully timed pause, during which Rei would jot down another symbol of the transmitted message. From the way Ami could see the shrine maiden turning up her nose at the blonde in the cloudy glow of the scrying device, her friends still hadn't made up. At least, the fact that a new senshi had been found - Sailor Jupiter - seemed to have eased the tension between them. The blue-haired girl felt as if a huge load had been lifted from her shoulders, now that she knew that the others were no longer on their own. She hadn't caught a glimpse of the new girl yet, because she wasn't present in the shrine right now, but from Usagi's description, Sailor Jupiter sounded like a fighter. Hopefully, she would be able to keep the others and herself safe. Upon obtaining the news, the young Keeper had experienced a moment of brief, irrational fear that she would be replaced in the hearts of her friends. That had passed quickly when she had seen how Usagi's face had brightened once Rei had told her about Ami making contact once again. Right now, the blonde was still

scribbling away furiously, with the tip of her pink tongue peeking out of the left corner of her mouth, and her long pigtails draped over the table. Ami felt almost guilty for doubting her. She did, however, feel real guilt over saddling them with a decision that should be hers to make. As she finished her transmission, she reminded herself once again that she was too biased to think straight here, so she needed a second opinion.

Hunched deeply over the glowing orb, Ami stared into it. Through space and dimensions, she watched as the faces of her friends became both worried and interested as they translated the dots and lines of Morse code into letters. The end of Luna's tail twitched while the black cat read the message, sitting next to Usagi's left elbow on the table. Rei was at her right, putting aside her quarrel with the blonde for the moment as she peered at the translation, her mouth turning into a small circle of surprise. Done with their lecture, the three immediately started talking animatedly, gesticulating and interrupting each other as they discussed Ami's plan. The blue-haired girl couldn't hear what they were saying, but it looked as if the shrine maiden was disagreeing more with Luna than with Usagi. After a while, the raven-haired girl grabbed a pen and wrote down a short question.

"The amount of energy you are planning to offer to Metallia is much less than what the dark generals are gathering on each mission, right?"

'Yes' was a very short reply, and Rei didn't even have to put it on paper to translate it.

"And you aren't going to take enough energy from anyone to harm them?"

Ami answered in the affirmative again.

"And Jadeite wasn't the one to suggest this plan, correct?"

"Yes."

"And you could really use the additional help?"

"Yes."

"And the victims are suffering right now and are going to continue suffering forever unless you help them?"

Once more, Ami confirmed Rei's query.

"Then why are you even asking us if you should go ahead? Even if they are youma, just leaving them where they are would be inhumane! Aren't you supposed to be the smart one of us?"

"Yes, don't sweat it Ami, go right ahead! We will work harder than ever to stop the Dark Kingdom so they won't get any more energy, so we are all safe," Usagi added with a smile, having pushed aside Rei in her bid for the writing tools. Only Luna was hanging her head, and flattening her ears against it.

Ami couldn't understand what the black moon cat was saying, but figured it had to be something along the lines of "Just be careful."

"Thank you." Ami sent back, feeling much more secure in her idea now.

"Treason." Queen Beryl slammed the end of her grey staff into the ground in anger, causing a loud bang to echo through her chambers as its flaring bottom barely failed to shatter the floor tiles. The sound reminded Nephrite of a coffin lid slamming shut, especially when he took the icy expression on his ruler's sharp features into account. He wasn't about to interrupt and draw attention to himself when she was in a bad enough mood that her long, red hair rose upward like grasping tentacles of an undersea creatures as they swayed in the power she was radiating. "Of course. The red-eyed girl is Sailor Mercury, that's why that spell looked familiar. The one that Jadeite told me was dead! They must have plotted against me since the very start!" The queen sneered while she thought out loud, and Nephrite was sure that she would have stalked around the room like a caged tiger if the tightness of her violet dress had not constricted her ankles so much.

"It all makes sense now. It explains why the sailor senshi can always find our operations before they can get off the ground." Beryl trailed off, thinking. "This means the conspiracy hasn't been rooted out yet, despite Jadeite's removal. *Someone* is still funnelling information to those pests." Quick like a snake, she turned her head toward Nephrite, eyes flashing in anger. "Nephrite! I want these traitors rooted out! Find them and purge them! Start with the remains of Jadeite's division! They will learn what it means to defy me!" She raised her right hand, palm facing the ceiling, and made a crushing motion with her fingers.

The long-haired general, who had hoped she had forgotten about his presence, gulped and bowed deeply. "Of course, my Queen," he said before using the opportunity to make an exit. Frowning, he reappeared in his mansion. This would be unpleasant business, but maybe some good could come out of it. If he could implicate Zoisite somehow...

The thunderstorm howled around the huge barb of ice that protruded horizontally out of the prow of Ami's iceberg. A darker cube could be seen through the layers of clear ice, suspended over the boiling sea within the spike. Ami stood inside in the new room she had created at the very tip of her territory, about as far from her dungeon heart as was possible. Well-lit and entirely-composed of ochre sandstone blocks, her new temple looked deceptively simple and innocent. Nothing in the mostly empty room appeared sophisticated, because it hadn't been consecrated to a particular god yet. The only feature of interest was a square well in its centre, constructed from the same stone as the rest of the chamber. Four crude columns loomed over the hip-high wall forming the basin, also failing to justify the expense that had gone into the construction of this temple. The room had cost more than all of the others of the dungeon, excluding the dungeon heart, put together. The true complexity that the primitive interior of this place was hiding only became apparent when Ami looked into the swirling depths of the central pool. The water gurgled and shimmered near hypnotically, and the blue-haired girl couldn't make out the bottom even with her visor. This was doubly disconcerting to her because she knew that there was

nothing but a metre of air and three metres of ice underneath the stone floor.

The teenager took a step back from the pool, feeling no desire to stay close to it, despite the seductive idea that it could potentially be a gateway home. Not when it whispered to her in strange, unsettling voices that bypassed the ears completely and resonated inside of her skull, making her teeth vibrate. With a shudder, Ami turned and walked out of her room, her boots hitting the cobblestones covering the ground in such rapid succession that to an observer, it would have looked as if she was running away. Once outside, she eagerly pressed a panel set into the bare ice of the corridor, and with loud grinding noises, the open doorway seemed to grow shorter. The temple, suspended from above by strong iron chains, slowly sank deeper into the ground until it came to a stop with a rumbling thud. Ami could still have entered through the doorway if she had crawled on all fours, but that was not necessary. She saw that the light inside had gone out, and with her Keeper sight, she confirmed that the pool was nothing but an empty depression at the moment. Now that the room was resting on a piece of ground that she had left unclaimed on purpose, it was no longer connected to her dungeon, and therefore inert. She intended to leave it that way any time she wasn't actually using it.

A sudden hiss prompted her to focus on the black, paper-thin oval that was opening in mid-air, hovering in the corridor. A blonde head appeared, followed by the rest of Jadeite's body as he dived through, ahead of a roaring orange flame that licked out of the portal and melted away the wall it touched. The dark general's somersault brought his back out of the path of the conflagration by the barest of margins, at the cost of slamming into the hard ground with an audible impact. The stream of flames cut off abruptly as the portal contracted and disappeared.

"Jadeite! Are you all right? What happened?" Ami's feet splashed through the puddle of hot meltwater as she raced through the cloud of steam toward the curly-haired blond.

Before she could kneel down at his side, he offered a groaned "Dragon" by way of explanation.

"Dragon?!" Ami screeched in surprise. "Are you all- who's that?" Ami froze as she spotted the long-haired woman with pointy ears in the dark general's arms. Distracted by the flames, she had failed to spot the curvy figure clad in a stained shift, especially as Jadeite's larger body had hidden her smaller frame from view.

"Unhand me, peasant!" the brunette demanded as she sat up, sneering down at the man who had cushioned her fall. "I am of royal blood!"

Ami leaned in closer to examine the two for injuries, still confused by the exchange, and got a palm to her chest for her trouble. The newcomer pushed her away without even looking. "This is no way to treat a princess! And you, what were you thinking, trying to get so close to my illustrious self?" She turned her head, getting a first glimpse of the dark-clad girl sitting on the floor, blinking up at her in confusion. With two crimson eyes that glowed like the pits of hell. "AAAAHHHH-"

The princess' scream of terror cut off when she slumped over, having fallen unconscious without warning. "And elf," Jadeite said, removing his hand from her shoulder, and presenting a second pulsating ball of life energy to Mercury. The blue-haired girl was still gaping at him. "Heard about a dragon's lair in a tavern. Went to investigate. Found her chained to the entrance. Guess someone didn't like her charming personality." The dark general was panting, keeping his explanations short and to the point while he recovered his breath. "Spotted the ears, wanted to take a sample. Dragon disapproved. Managed to drain some energy from it anyway. Now here we are."

"Um." Ami looked at the sleeping form sprawled on the ground. "Saving her was a very heroic thing to do, I approve," she decided finally, smiling at her employee and prospective boyfriend.

"Whatever. I need a shower." Jadeite stood up, patting the dust and ash off of his scorch-marked uniform. "What should I do with her?"

Ami removed a green-glowing hand from the woman's back, having found nothing seriously wrong with her. "Put her into a cell for the moment. I want to ask her some questions when she wakes up."

A bald silhouette with two short horns protruding from its head stood in front of a hideous stone face that took up the entire back wall of the chamber. Fires burned in the hollow eye sockets above the crooked nose of the idol, their light making the dark skin of the bare-chested man gleam like polished tin.

"Of course she was cheating, my Lord. It was obvious to all." He inclined his head and remained still for a while, as if listening to something only he could hear.

A leg clad in red trousers lashed out, kicking a black-lacquered, human-sized object on the floor. The shoe rattled the breastplate that was wrought to resemble a ribcage, causing the suit of armour to ring hollowly. "Yes. This just makes all of her accomplishments a fraud, not just most," the figure chuckled. The fires in the eyes of the statue burned brighter, and plaster trickled from the ceiling.

"Oh, I find it quite amusing actually, no disrespect intended." He waited, listening once more into the darkness.

"Yes, punishment must be meted out. Certainly. I suggest Alphel. She is the more mentally capable of the two, and may be able to figure out how this works. Morrigan may feel left out, however." The piece of armour disappeared with a popping noise, and the tightly-packed skulls that formed the entirety of the room's floor stared up from where it had been.

"A most formidable idea, my Lord." The man turned away from the statue, revealing the bright red eyes set in his face. "That should satisfy him. Both of them toil and try sooo hard, it's quite endearing, isn't it?" Feathers rustled as two massive black wings unfolded, and the dark angel leaned back, letting out a laugh that went on and on, swelling in volume until the walls of the compound were shaking. Outside, the black-robed and hooded priests of Azzathra ducked their heads and threw nervous glances toward the rumbling gate leading to the inner sanctum, gritting their teeth as the evil laughter shook their bones.

Ami stood silently in the darkened chamber, her pale face illuminated only by the glow of the swirls of light that hovered in front of her like miniature stars. The individual knots of life energy looked fairly similar to each other, but there were differences that even the bare eye could distinguish. For example, the spiralling orb of thumbnail-sized whiteness drained from a goblin looked smaller than a different one that came from a human, which in turn was less dense than that from an orc. Nevertheless, were it not for the inscribed badges set into the floor above which the lights floated in place, Ami wouldn't have been able to identify their origin. The shine of the life energy glittered on the letters stamped into the metal of the markers, drawing her gaze as she read the listed species names. Goblin and human energy had been trivially easy to come by, while orc, troll, and dark elf had only been marginally harder, requiring a brief trip to an Underworld tavern. Bile demon energy, likewise, had been acquired with a bribe of food. Some of the more exotic samples, however, left her wondering where or how Jadeite had acquired them. The source for the tentacle monster was obvious, of course, but skeleton? She hadn't even know that there was such a thing as skeleton life energy before she had seen its sickly grey glow above its nameplate. The same went for ghost energy. The gaze of the Keeper's ember-like eyes swept over the stone table, searching for a plate that said 'vampire', but finding none.

She nodded with relief, glad to see that the dragon was the most dangerous creature that the dark general had gone after. An entire third of the collected energy came from non-sentient animals, like rats and cows, but also from more mystical creatures, such as gryphons and unicorns. All harvested in one fell swoop from a circus, Jadeite had reported. Ami wouldn't mind visiting one of its performances with him at her side. Blushing, she shook her head. This was no time for idle fantasies about dating. Once she went through with her request, the temple would be consecrated to Metallia, she understood.

The curve of her lips bent downward as she stared at the eerie well around which the life energy was arranged in concentric circles. Not all of it, of course. She had claimed about half of each sample for her own lab, as there were a number of experiments she wanted to

run. The results might even be able to fix one of her many problems. A sinister-looking smile banished the sour expression from her face. Despite how much she hated having to feed more power to the dormant dark goddess, Ami knew that she had no other option for freeing the victims suffering through Beryl's punishment. A faint voice at the back of her mind insisted that those were only youma, not worth the risk of hastening Metallia's revival, but she brushed it aside, remembering her own terror and despair when she was trapped helplessly in Azzathra's clutches. She glanced back over her shoulder, where Jadeite was standing in the doorway with crossed arms. He met her eyes and nodded encouragingly, prompting Ami to take a deep breath and spread her arms. Focusing on the well, she called out, "Queen Metallia! Hear me! I offer you samples of life energy from many different creatures! Please take them in order from most to least appealing, so that I shall know where to best focus my efforts in the future! In return, I beg you to send me the prisoners trapped in Eternal Sleep. They may be useless to Queen Beryl, but they could be of great assistance to your cause in my service!"

Her plea completed, Ami lowered her arms and waited. Inside the basin, the water brightened, drawing a wavering, lit rectangle onto the ceiling as the shadows in the room started crawling.

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A Rescued Princess

Originally on 2010-04-16T00:59:00

Before Ami's widened eyes, the yellowish sandstone that the small temple was built from darkened in tone, colour leaching out of it as its surface took on a shinier, more polished gleam. The ground shifted under the soles of her boots while cobblestones smoothed into a single solid plate, but she didn't dare take her eyes off of the bright motes of life energy hanging motionless in the air, for fear of missing something. *I hope the Mercury computer is recording all of this.* The opened device was sitting on a low pedestal in the left back corner of the room, watching silently as the chamber trembled from the corruption that was flowing into it, creeping along the walls like black, wriggling maggots. Then, the first swirl of energy moved, hurling itself into the gaping maw that was the central basin. The glow from the spinning whirlpool within brightened like a camp fire that had been fed a new log, hissing until it returned to its previous luminance. Ami glanced at the metal name plate that identified the first sample that Metallia had devoured. Dragon.

Keeping her expression passive, the blue-haired girl pondered the implications. Dragons were huge, smart, and powerful. *Blue whale or bile demon next, then.*To Ami's surprise, none of the swirls of pale light harvested from massive creatures budged. A dim-looking globe was the next to vanish within the watery abyss. The young Keeper checked the name plate and was surprised to read 'goblin', which smashed her first tentative hypothesis into dust. She failed to immediately identify some obvious similarity between large, fire-breathing, winged lizards and small, numerous, and wimpy humanoids. *They are both green, but...*

The next diffuse orb of energy that drowned within the temple's turbulent well left her even more perplexed. *That hadn't even been life energy at all, but a bit of Snyder's Light magic!* The frozen ball of volatile magic was a dead end outcome of her research into making the permanent destruction of vampires easier. Unfortunately, it had proven too ephemeral to work with, and when released from its

storage, it simply faded away. She had only put it with the other energy on a whim, as she had no better use for it. While the positive energy displayed some similarities to life energy, Ami hadn't expected Metallia to accept it at all, much less to consider it a favoured choice!

While blinking at the well in confusion, Ami nearly missed the next sequence of glowing motes that plunged into the waiting basin in rapid succession. Troll, human, dwarf, both varieties of elf, then fairy were the ones she could identify before the miniature stars threw themselves into the central basin too fast for her to read all the names. The comatose goddess seemed to feast indiscriminately, not caring particularly about the properties of the rest of the remaining orbs of life energy she was devouring. No, that was wrong, Ami realised. The rush slowed, and two particular glowing orbs moved only reluctantly toward the basin. Skeleton and ghost energy, Ami could tell from the pale, tattered appearance of the shining spheres alone. The faint blue light shining from underneath the rumbling whirlpool reddened, giving the well the appearance of blood as the energy of the undead disappeared, too. *That's not good, is it?*

Ami took a cautious step away from the central well. The square of red light washing over the ceiling gave its protruding stone veins the disturbing appearance of pulsing with life. The teenage Keeper felt her muscles relax when the light returned to its regular hue, and looked to what remained of the star field of life energy suspended in mid-air. A quick glance revealed that all of them originated from aquatic, mythical, and regular fauna. So far, none of them were moving. Didn't Metallia want energy from non-sentient sources? The teenager listened as the ethereal murmurs emanating from the profane pool quieted down, and she felt her heartbeat speed up in anticipation. As she waited for the first of the trapped youma to appear from the whirlpool, she grasped her left hand with her right, palpitating the limb that still hadn't fully recovered yet.

Wait, the remaining life energy *was* moving. Ami assumed that Metallia had decided that beggars couldn't be choosers and watched all of the animal-derived samples being drawn toward the central well. Its yellowish sandstone had turned into something

darker that resembled marble over the course of the ceremony. The swirling orbs gathered in the square pool, but did not descend into it. Instead, they floated like luminous cherry blossoms on the turbulent surface. Slowly, their glow withered away, turning black, until it looked as if the glowing pool was covered in sunspots. Ami took a step forward to get a better look when the individual dark smears converged into a single oily-looking film. It bulged upward, turning into an opaque black bubble that detached itself from the water. With wide-open eyes, Ami tracked its rise to just above eye level, unsure of what to expect. With a crackling noise, the black energy turned into a net of twisting dark lightning that darted toward the nervous girl, striking true despite her startled backward lunge. For a split second, it felt as if liquid fire was forcing itself through her nervous system, creeping toward a spot in the centre of her forehead. The world went black.

"Mercury! Mercury, wake up!"

Ami opened her eyes, prompted by the insisting shaking on her left shoulder, and saw three blurry shapes obscuring her view of her bedroom's ceiling. She blinked to clear her eyes and focused her gaze on the three lumps, and they resolved into the worried faces of Jadeite, Cathy, and Snyder looking down at her.

"Finally! Are you all right? What happened?" Cathy was sitting on the edge of the bed and had her hand on Mercury's shoulder, still shaking absently.

"Punishment for offering an unworthy sacrifice," Snyder declared, his red hair bouncing as he nodded sagely. "One of the dangers of dealing with temperamental and evil dark gods, as I have warned against."

"Um, no, I don't think so," Ami said as she sat up, feeling woozy. She had a light headache, and the skin on her brow prickled, but it wasn't anything worse than she would expect from a common cold. "I think it wasn't supposed to hurt, just a side effect from having to work with unsuitable energy." Seeing that she had been lying on top of the covers, she found herself still wearing her black Keeper garb, which indicated that she had only been unconscious for short time. It wouldn't hurt to verify this, though. "How long have I been out?"

"About a quarter of an hour," Jadeite reported. The dark general was standing at the head end of the bed, which meant that Ami had to turn around to look at him. The expression of relief on his face, presumably at seeing that she was all right, made her feel warm and comfortable. "So, what *did* our Great Ruler do to you?"

Ami rubbed her forehead, which still itched a little underneath the skin. "She wedged knowledge about a spell into my brain. It's... " she trailed off, rolling up her eyes as she gauged the new knowledge, "about the victims trapped in Eternal Sleep. I'm supposed to get them myself if I want them so badly."

"Oh." Jadeite looked slightly taken aback by the news.

"Is that dangerous? Do you have to go into the dark gods' realm?" Cathy asked, getting out of the way as Ami slid off the bed and stood on her feet, swaying only for a moment.

The blue-haired girl shook her head. "Not dangerous, just time-consuming. I will have to cast it at the temple, too."

"You could teach it to me," Jadeite offered. "I would be happy to take over that task while you work on more important things."

Ami smiled at him. "I'd like that. Hmm. It might be best if you retrieve those lost Fairies before I do. This work could potentially tie you down for weeks."

"As you wish," Jadeite said, holding his right arm horizontally across his chest as he gave a slight bow. "I have just the plan..."

Green eyes opened drowsily, crossing to fixate on the object twitching just in front of their owner's nose. Two quivering nostrils came into focus, attached to a whiskered grey snout. Beady black eyes stared back at the waking woman, reflecting her confused facial expression.

"EEEK!" A loud, feminine cry of outrage echoed through the cell block, which was located just underneath Ami's throne room, on the border between the restricted and unrestricted sections of the ship.

The woman, who had identified herself as a noble earlier, somehow managed to go from lying flat on her belly to sitting up and scrambling backwards on all fours until her back slammed into a cold-hard wall. "Rats! What kind of vile, disgusting place is this?!" A thrown shoe bounced off of the carpeted ground just behind the tail of the fleeing rat, missing the startled rodent only by a finger's breadth on the rebound. With the immediate danger eliminated, the elf woman took stock of her situation. No dragon: good. Uncomfortable, substandard bed: barely acceptable. Bright ceiling lights that just had to be magical: tentatively good. They didn't mesh at all with the precisely-cut stone walls that had been left bare, of course. Sloppy work. Seriously, it looked like whoever had designed this place had run out of money after installing fanciful arcane lighting and therefore left the rest of the room plain and functional. Putting the thought aside, she took in the final feature of the room, half-hidden behind a drab grey curtain that dangled from the ceiling. Iron bars blocking the exit: very bad.

"Hello? Is something wrong? I heard you scream." The concerned-sounding girl's voice came from outside, prompting the pointy-eared woman to raise her gaze from the shabby-looking carpet and toward the speaker. With a glance, she took in the strange apparel of the young woman. Well-tailored black trousers with golden trim that could have been worn by any prince, but were horribly unsuitable for a girl, worn with a similar jacket of military cut that was held together at the waist by a belt. Given her own soiled white shift, the princess wasn't really in any position to make caustic judgements about someone else's attire. Especially if that someone else had eyes that looked like the dying embers in a fireplace. Cringing at the sight, she recovered after a split-second and straightened her back, taking refuge in boldness. "You have got rats!" she declared haughtily, raising her nose disdainfully at the deceptively innocent-looking fiend in front of her cell.

The blue-haired girl raised her right hand to her mouth as she let out a giggle. "Indeed, but don't worry, they are very well-trained rats."

The brunette huffed. "A likely story. Rats. And these quarters are completely unsuitable for a person of my status! Just look at this moth-eaten carpet! It is an insult! And who are you, anyway, to

address me so familiarly?"

"My name is Sailor Mercury," Ami informed the woman. "Is there's anything wrong that isn't related to your quarters?"

"Are you kidding? My clothes are filthy, I itch everywhere, there's no servant in sight, and I need a bath! You call that all right?" Trailing off, she tapped her long fingernails against the palm of her other hand as she though. "Sailor Mercury... Mercury... where have I heard that before?"

Ami had to admit that she was deriving some guilty pleasure from watching the blood leave the entitled-feeling woman's face as recognition hit home. Her satisfaction was short lived, as the princess' next proclamation caused her to grimace.

"Keeper Mercury the Deviant! That's it, isn't?" She narrowed her eyes. "Well, that explains the masculine garb." The elf cocked her head. "I'd thought you would be taller, really. Don't you dare touch me! I'm not going to participate in your vile and depraved activities!"

Not this again. Ami hung her head and raised both hands, palms facing outwards. "I assure you that I have no such intentions. My entire reputation is based on nothing but unfounded rumours and outright lies."

"Oh, so you never punched a horned reaper to death? Of course not. That would just be silly. Ohohohoho."

Slowly and deliberately, Ami lowered her eyelids, pressing them together hard and leaving them that way to deal with her growing irritation. "That particular rumour happens to be true," she stated neutrally.

"And you also employ a tentacle monster, is it not so?"

"Yes, but I don't see why tha-"

"I rest my case. The rumours are *clearly* sufficiently accurate!"

Ami sighed. "I am not going to convince you, am I? Nevertheless, it is the truth, and you have nothing to fear from me."

"All right. Let's work with this absurd notion that the rumours are false for the moment. What, then, are you planning to do with me? Speak!" the elf woman ordered imperiously, apparently not all that worried about addressing a Keeper that way.

"Nothing. One of my employees just happened to rescue you from a dragon. I don't even know who you are!" Ami said, trying hard to remain polite.

"I am princess Julia Morgana of Danai. And rescue? That's what you call pawing at me like that?" The elf princess waved a dainty hand dismissively, ignoring the incredulously-narrowed crimson eyes of her captor.

"Would you have preferred to stay with the dragon? I'm sure any so-called 'pawing' was entirely unintentional," Ami defended the curly-haired general, letting a hint of annoyance creep into her voice. "Danai is located in that forested area at the west border of King Albrecht's realm, isn't it?" she asked, drawing on her memory of the local geography. "Very well, I will just return you there."

"No! I mean, that won't be necessary," the princess said quickly, "just put me back where you found me."

"With the dragon? You can't be serious!" By now, Ami was looking at the princess as if she was crazy.

"A simple overgrown lizard couldn't dream of giving me trouble," the elf said, raising her head arrogantly. "I *am* an accomplished sorceress, you low-born Underworlder, and was trying to lure the monster out. Now do as you were told!"

Ami re-evaluated her opinion of the curvy woman. She didn't look like sorceress material to her in that short white dress. Nor like a princess, or like anyone who wanted to be anywhere near a dragon, really. She also lacked the muscles one would expect from an adventurer. Then again, one couldn't always judge a book by its covers, especially where magical disguises were concerned. "But it wouldn't be any more trouble to get you home instead," Ami offered again. "In fact, the effort required would be exactly the same." She put a finger to her right earring, summoning the transparent blue

surface of her visor.

"I insist," Julia snapped, "now respect my wishes and do as you were told!"

Ami audibly sucked in her breath at the readout flickering over the screen. The princess had magical reserves that far outstripped those of her warlocks, yes, but that wasn't what had set the blue haired girl on edge.

"Are you even listening to me? Don't you dare ignor- GAH!"

Princess Julia found herself yanked from her position, followed by a light touch on her shoulder. The world flashed blue for an instant and the atmosphere changed. Instead of a cool and somewhat dusty-smelling dungeon, she found herself surrounded by the smell of grass and leafy trees. Without the bed supporting it, her behind succumbed to gravity and got painfully acquainted with the dewy grass.

"You are working for another Keeper!" Ami accused the grimacing woman, glaring down at her through her visor from where she was hovering half a metre above the ground.

"So what?" the princess squinted through the bright sunlight that was a drastic change from her former location. "You are hardly in a position to condemn other people's career choices, *Keeper*," she said as she pulled herself to her feet with the aid of a nearby tree trunk and patted the dirt off of her shoulder.

"Wha-?" If it hadn't been for Ami's visor being already active, she would have missed the arcane gesture hidden within the casual-looking movement. Forewarned by the outlined glow gathering around the bending fingers, she barely managed to swerve out of the way of the near-invisible distortion that parted the air where her neck had just been, moving in absolute silence. Over the sound of her blood rushing through her veins, she heard a buzzing noise behind her as the imperceptible disc bit through a tree trunk. Wasting no time, she reacted to the attack by retrieving a stashed-away Shabon Spray Freezing from storage, which erupted into aquamarine light and bubbles between the would-be assassin's

knees. The princess let out a loud gasp as the icy cold enveloped her up to the waist, immobilising the lower part of her body in a shell of ice and effectively freezing her to the tree standing behind her. Poisonous green eyes glared at Ami from a face distorted into an angry snarl that revealed perfect white teeth.

Warily, the blue-haired girl floated in an arc around the trapped elf, flanking her. Raising her voice to be heard over the cracking and crashing noise of the tree toppling behind her, she shouted, "Stop that, or the next one isn't going to miss! Why did you attack me, and who are you working for? Was this all part of an elaborate scheme?"

"Don't flatter yourself, you foolish human monkey-thing. You were a target of opportunity, nothing more. I'm sure my liege will be delighted to go after a weak Keeper like you once I report back to him! Releasing a prisoner, what a joke!"

Before Ami could react, the woman's shape flattened and melted into the rough bark of the tree touching her back. Her condescending smirk was the last thing to disappear. Within the hollow of the ice, nothing but the crumpled piece of white cloth that was the stained shift the princess had been wearing remained. The blue-haired girl's visor confirmed that the sorceress was gone. "Darn it!"

What worried Ami most was the very real possibility that the enemy Keeper had checked up on his minion while she had been on the ship. In contrast to scrying, Ami could tell exactly where her employees were with her Keeper sense, even over vast distances. She had to assume that other Keepers had similar abilities, which meant that the secrecy of her ship's current location could be compromised. She didn't know of any easy ways that a Keeper could assault a swimming fortress, but that just meant that she was unaware of them, not that they didn't exist. She gritted her teeth, determined to tighten the defences of her dungeon. And then, there was the princess. For the sake of her friends back home, she hoped that the Moon Princess, should she ever be found, wasn't anything like that elf.

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A Capture

Originally on 2010-04-19T20:27:00

Seagull cries echoed through the air, competing against the noise of the waves and the hubbub caused by the vendors at the fish market, who were loudly proclaiming the merits of their wares. Camilla wrinkled her nose as the morning breeze carried the smell of the merchandise up the hill overlooking both the busy stalls and the nearby piers, over to her table in front of a small tavern. "Eww. Anise, when will our ship finally be ready?" the blonde fairy asked, resting her chin in her palms as she watched crates being loaded onto the high-masted vessels anchored in the harbour.

The redhead sitting across from her chewed rapidly, gulping down a huge mouthful before answering, "Two more days. The King probably didn't take our wings into account when he estimated our travel time. Hey, are you still eating that?" Anise pointed at her sister's platter with her fork, where a few golden-brown fried potatoes yet remained uneaten. Without a word, the blonde shoved the plate over and leaned back in her chair, crossing her arms behind her head and closing her eyes. "This place is sooo boring."

The ambient temperature seemed to fall as a shadow fell over her face. "Maybe I can help with that," a friendly male voice offered.

Camilla opened her eyes and stared at the silhouette blotting out the sunlight. Her pupils widened at the sight of the handsome man in the local white and blue naval officer's uniform. Curly blond bangs peeked out from underneath his cap, underlining his roguish grin.

"May I show you lovely ladies around the city to alleviate your boredom?" he asked, revealing gleaming white teeth as he smiled.

The youngest fae's golden eyes sparkled as she leaned forward, clasping her hands together and fluttering her eyelashes. "May you ever!"

Even the green-haired third fairy sister, who had up to now happily

ignored her siblings while she spooned out her soup, looked rather flushed as she pondered the confident-looking stranger's offer. The trio of girls put their heads together, whispering and giggling. "All right, we will take you up on your offer, Mr. ?"

"Jason. Jason Dayte," the man said, introducing himself to the trio with a polite, militarily precise bow.

The emerald-eyed fairy smiled back. "My name is Tilia. This are my sisters Camilla," she pointed at the blushing blonde, "and Anise." The redhead waved a short greeting, not letting go of her knife as she redoubled her efforts to annihilate her meal with haste. Tilia pushed her chair back and stood up, fluttering her dragonfly-like wings and dispersing some glitter that was almost invisible in the sunlight. "I'll be right back, just have to pay our bill." A moment later, she had disappeared into the white-façaded building, nearly running down a guest who was just leaving. Her sisters leaned over the table until their faces nearly touched and exchanged a few hushed words, laughing.

When Jadeite, master of disguise, was sure they weren't looking at him, his eyes narrowed, turning his smile altogether more sinister. So far, phase one of his plan had gone without a hitch. He would lead the foolish girls around, hand them a few energy-draining presents, and take a 'shortcut' through a back alley, from which they were never going to return. Later he would pick up the rest of them the same way. This was going to be *easy*.

Tilia was having a good time touring the town with their self-styled guide, even though the sights were nothing all of them hadn't seen many times over in other harbour cities. Of course, none of the fairies had expected anything different. This was, after all, just an excuse to hang out with a good-looking guy, or hang off of him, as her siblings were doing right now. Even tomboyish Anise had not let go of Jason's left arm since he had gifted each of the sisters with a white crocus flower, eliciting a squeal of delight from Camilla. Tilia inspected the petals of her own present, rotating it slowly by twirling its stem as she followed behind the three. Crocus, in late summer. Really? She fell behind a few steps as she removed her thin gloves

and stroked the stem between two fingers that dripped with golden glitter. Sure enough, she could feel her skin prickle where it touched the plant, and this wasn't the good kind of magic, either. The fairy's eyes seemed to bore into the man's back as she wondered what this meant. Her sisters were oblivious to the danger, lost in polite conversation with the hunk. Maybe she was reading too much into this? Only one way to find out. With a grim smile gracing her lips, the short-haired fae fluttered her wings to catch up with the group.

Jadeite was not having a good time. Sure, the plan was moving along without a hitch, but maintaining his pleasant and caring mask while the three clingy airheads pulled him this way and that way became harder by the minute. They kept talking about petty things like fashion, for example, asking for his opinion on the strangest things. Why did they even bother? As far as he could tell, they were all wearing the same things anyway: back-free white leotards, to which they had added knee-length trousers in order to not offend local sensibilities. They only differed in their accessories, so why were they making a big deal out of this? The disguised dark general sighed inwardly as he complimented the blue ribbon in the blonde's hair. The girls constantly shooting off their mouths really made him appreciate Sailor Mercury's quietness and deliberation, which contrasted with the incessant chattering of the fairy trio like night and day. These fairies were so pushy. At least the green-haired one's hand had ceased wandering across his backside for the time being. Fortunately, it would all be over soon.

He suppressed a grin as he led the group around a corner and into a narrow but clean back alley. The sounds of the city receded, muffled by the high brick walls enclosing the winding passage on both sides. The curly-haired blond looked back over his shoulder, verifying that the visible part of the path behind him was as devoid of life as the part ahead. Only a grey alley cat noticed his gaze, hissing at him before jumping over a wall and disappearing out of sight. Perfect. With an ugly grin, he commanded his flowers to drain energy from his unsuspecting targets, which would render them unconscious, and would finally, *finally* shut them up. All of a sudden, his knees felt weak and his vision went blurry. What in the name of the Great

Ruler...? As he staggered, steadying himself against the wall with his left hand, he noticed that his companions had let go of him.

"I knew it! Get him, girls!" called the offensively jolly voice of Tilia from behind him, completely unaffected by the energy drain. With a jolt, Jadeite cut power to the spell, feeling some of his vitality return. He whirled around, just in time to see the green and the blond girls both dash toward him, one to his left, one to his right. Two smooth-skinned legs whistled toward his face in scything arcs, the horizontal kicks only separated by a hand's width of space between them. The dark general raised his left arm in a block, but moved still too sluggish to protect himself. The double impact catapulted the steely-eyed blond backward, bouncing him off the wall. With a furious snarl, made all the more vicious-looking by the blood trickling from his split lip, he started drawing dark power to his hands as he jumped back to his feet. With a loud thud, the third fairy brought a wooden plank down on the back of his head with an overhead blow, jumping to put all of her weight behind it. The crackling black lightning playing around the dark general's hands faded out as he slumped like a puppet with its strings cut.

"Bastard," the redhead said, looking down at the unconscious form lying prone on the ground, and dropped the dented plank.

"Is he still alive?" Camilla asked in a small voice, grabbing his wrist and searching for a pulse.

"Don't worry, he's still breathing," Tilia poined out. "Told you he was evil," the green-haired fairy added smugly, removing the three flowers from the unconscious man's back pocket.

"Hey, he's changing! Look!" Anise said, her dark ruby eyes going wide as Jadeite's glamour faded away.

"It's him again!"

"Good! It would be so horrible if there were two evil cuties!"

"What do we do with him now?"

"He's some kind of wizard, let's take him to the temple and get some

wards on him," Tilia ordered.

"And to get his face healed!"

"Yes, Camilla, and to get his face healed," the green-haired fairy agreed exasperatedly. "I'll grab the legs, you take a shoulder each!"

A narrow, withered staircase of smoothed basalt stood freely in the centre of a vast cavern, leading up to a pitch black hole in the wall just below the fang-like stalactites hanging from the ceiling. The slippery steps lead straight upwards, with no railing to keep an unwary traveller from falling to a swift doom on the hard, fog-blanketed rocks below. Within the rectangular darkness at the top, two crimson slits burned hatefully, focusing their gaze on the black-robed figure kneeling at the bottom. "Tyris, I want a progress report on the armour Lord Azzathra sent me," a cold, female voice hissed, making the torches lining the ground level of the cave sputter.

"It is quite ingenious," the bow-legged warlock gushed, "I mean, look at the spellwork alone, the intricate-"

A loud smacking noise echoed through the tomb-like hall, flipping the bearded wizard over and sending him rolling through the puddles of brackish water dotting the ground in irregular intervals. "Get to the point, idiot! I didn't call you here to comment on the craftsmanship. How do we make it work?"

Gasping in pain and dripping green-stained water from his beard and drenched robes, Tyris pulled himself back to his knees. "I'm sorry, Lady Alphel," he grovelled. "Using it should be easy, if we find a power source."

Silence, in which only horrible wet grinding noises could be heard from the Keeper's hideout. "How did Mercury power it?"

"There are fittings for mana batteries inside, but I cannot imagine that they would last as long as the battle did. She must have powered it directly."

"So what you are saying that it can draw its power from whoever is

wearing it?" Alphel sounded intrigued, and the disturbing noises from the lightless hole she resided in stopped.

"Not exactly, my Lady," the warlock said, shivering. "It is likely that she used her dungeon heart to provide the power. There is no interface for the wearer to directly channel magic into it."

"But you do have a solution?" the Keeper's voice rumbled, leaving little doubt that a negative answer would not do wonders for her minion's life expectancy.

"Blood," Tyris blurted out, "The mana within is easily assimilated, and the suit can hold nine bodies worth of it, allowing it to operate for nearly fifteen minutes at full power!"

"That is all? How useless." Alphel's voice quivered with disdain. More bones cracked in the darkness while the Keeper thought things over. "As usual, the burden of putting this boon to good use lies entirely on me. The armour's most important innovation is the control scheme, anyway. It has already become clear to me that an external source of mana will not work. Now listen, this is what you will do: you will make a copy of this armour, cast from an alloy that has as many ghosts bound within as it takes to satisfy the power requirements. Do you understand?"

"Of course, Lady Alphel, b-but that would be hundreds of sacrifices per suit," the warlock pointed out with a gulp.

"Yes. Simple, cheap, and efficient, isn't it? Now begone, and do not disappoint me!"

Alphel missed her minion's hurried exit. In her daydream, a haunted army of steel behemoths, each one with the strength to fight a horned reaper on even terms, was cutting a bloody swath through her enemies. Soon, the world would burn.

"Ugh. What the- " Bright white light stung in Jadeite's eyes as he came to. He lifted his head and attempted to shield his eyes against the brilliance, but found his arms restrained behind his back. Cold,

metallic bands cut into his wrists as he yanked experimentally, causing his chains to rattle. His legs were tied to his chair in a similar way. Even more worrisome was the sucking sensation that ripped away all his magic before he could channel it into something useful. As his eyes adjusted to the brightness, he took in his surroundings. A small room with white marble walls and pillars, engraved with angular geometrical patterns. Not your regular prison. The only dots of colour were a few potted plants sprouting from round pails, and of course, the rainbow-coloured hair of his seven captors, arranged in a half-circle in front of him. No, that wasn't true, he realised. There were other people - two helmeted guards with halberds, wearing breastplates over their purple liveries and guarding the only door he could see. He belatedly noticed the three priests, whose white-and gold robes acted like camouflage in this environment. How many candles did they light to make it so bright in here, anyway? He gave up counting after the first two dozen, and wondered how exactly his plan had turned so horribly wrong.

"Ah, you are awake." The indigo-haired fairy, who was the tallest of the seven, stepped right in front of him, arms akimbo. "I remember you. You helped us escape from Keeper Mercury's dungeon. Why are you after us now? Explain!"

Jadeite shrugged his shoulders. "Well, she wanted you back."

"Why?" Melissa, the blue-haired sister, asked in a worried tone of voice, alarmed at the idea that a Keeper was after her personally.

"She wants to ask you some questions about the Shining Concord Empire and then transport you over there," Jadeite divulged with good grace.

Dandel raised an eyebrow at the answer and looked at something behind Jadeite. Her sceptical expression turned into one of surprise.

"See? See? She has to feed him lies like that to keep him working for her, I knew it!" Anise was jumping up and down now, drawing irate glances from her more dignified siblings. Jadeite, for his part, wondered how they had jumped to that conclusion, but he wasn't complaining. The less inclined they were to do something permanent to him, the better. He just hoped that Mercury would get

him out of this dangerous and annoying situation soon.

"Alas, young lady, outward appearances may be deceiving. Sometimes, a pretty face may hide inner ugliness." One of the priests, sporting a grandfatherly white beard, stepped forward, tapping his wooden staff on the ground as he walked. "I fear that this is one of these cases."

"No, Father, I don't believe that he is evil by choice!" The orange-haired fae objected loudly as she pointed right at the dark general's face, which earned her an irritated glance from the prisoner in question. "Look, he can't be a dark wizard! His eyes are glowing bluish-white, not red!"

"And yet, he is working for a Keeper," the old man said tiredly.

"Keeper Mercury is not evil," Jadeite said experimentally, testing a theory. The seven girls looked at him, then at something behind him, and gaped. The right guard raised one finger to his forehead and moved it in a circle, giving his opinion of Jadeite's mental state. That confirmed it, then. He was sitting in front of one of those truth detector things that Mercury had warned him about.

"He really believes that!"

"Now we know that he must be under some form of mind control," Camilla said immediately. "Please perform a cleansing ritual on him! I'm sure he will be all better after it!" The short blonde stared at the holy men with wide-open, pleading eyes, putting her child-like features to good use.

The three robed priests exchanged glances, first among themselves, then with the guards. The taller of the armoured men shrugged. "The King said to accommodate their wishes, if reasonably practical. I don't see any harm in going along with this. He'll still be around to interrogate afterwards."

The fairies cheered at the decision, completely failing to notice the worried expression that had appeared on Jadeite's face. What had he gotten into now?

Ami collapsed to her knees in fright after mentally checking on Jadeite, having just returned from her ill-fated interrogation of princess Julia. Upon realizing that the blond general had been captured, she had retrieved her advisers from their current tasks by way of Keeper transport, producing a classroom full of confused goblins wondering where their instructor had gone, and a bunch of furnaces filled with a ruined gem harvest in the process.

"Mercury, I know you are worried, but I don't really see how walking a furrow into the carpet will help," Jered said, sitting on the couch and watching the blue-haired girl stalk up and down the length of the living room. "You'll have ample opportunity to rescue him. It's not as if another Keeper has him. I really fail to see what you are so worked up about here."

"I can't go get him! I can't even see him! He has been brought into a temple of the Light!" Ami's answer was very close to a sob, and reminded the weasel-featured man that the teenager had a crush on the missing general, which meant she probably wasn't thinking too clearly right now.

"The first thing you need to do is to calm down," Cathy instructed. "They aren't going to hurt him. At least not until he had a proper trial. You have enough time to think of something. Calm down I said!" She repeated more forcefully, using the same commanding tone of voice she had used during the blue-haired girl's battle training, and it showed some effect.

Ami stopped pacing and stood rigidly, taking a deep breath. "But what if just being in there hurts him or kills him? He isn't really human, you know!" She really wished that she could see what was going on. When had being able to check up on him whenever she wished become so natural for her that she took the ability for granted? Instead, her over-active imagination taunted her with the terrifying image of him screaming and turning to dust like a youma upon being brought inside the temple.

Jered and Cathy both turned to look at Snyder, who was undoubtedly the most qualified to address these concerns. "Actually, I doubt that he is in any danger. The Light gods do not inflict harm lightly, even on those deserving it. Unless he is much, much more

evil than you think he is, he should be fine."

"Are you sure?" At the acolyte's nod, some of the pale teenager's tense muscles relaxed. "I'm being really silly right now, aren't I?" Ami asked, brushing over her eyes with the back of her right hand and attempting a smile, which ended up a bit bent. "All right. Jadeite has been captured, we need to save him."

"Whatever we do, we should do it at night. The guards will be less alert, and there won't be many innocent bystanders," Jered suggested, going from reassuring to business-like without transition. "They won't take him outside the temple, given that you rescued Snyder a while ago by teleporting in."

"I may not be able to go personally, but I'll do my best to plan this rescue," Ami said, opening her Mercury computer, and furrowing her brow in determination. "All right, we need to decide whom to send and..."

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Convoluted Rescue Plan, Go!

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In a warehouse, an unremarkable wooden barrel stood in a row with other of its kind, ready to receive a filling of salted fish. The container shook and belched out a small cloud of snowflakes that dissipated rapidly in the dry air. Its lid rose a hand's width, allowing a pair of glowing red eyes to peer out through the dark gap. Ami listened into the room, holding her breath to stay quieter. Her heartbeat sounded inordinately loud to her own ears, but the noise of the workers and of the waves, even dampened by passing through the pine wooden walls, was louder still. The girl's blue-haired head emerged from her cover, glancing left and right and confirming her computer's assessment: she was alone in the building, for now. This was just as well, because uninvited, black clad intruders with large backpacks tended to be universally regarded with suspicion.

Ami extricated herself from the narrow barrel by floating straight upward, rather than trying to awkwardly put a leg over the edge. Magic was convenient at times. She alighted on the dusty ground without making a sound, throwing a cautious glance toward the main door that was slightly ajar and surrounded by thin bands of sunlight. Footsteps on the pier outside prompted her to retreat deeper into the hall. She really hoped that nobody would observe the next phase of her plan, as they would inevitably jump to the wrong conclusions. She slipped off her leather backpack and deposited the large, rectangular shape softly on the ground. Now she had only one more obstacle to neutralise. Red eyes narrowed at a dark corner from which poison-green eyes peered at her suspiciously around the stacked crates. Ami squatted down, leaning forward and rubbing the fingers of her extended right hand together. "Here, kitty kitty!" she whispered.

A minute later, the warehouse's mouser was curled up safely in her arms, purring like a well-oiled engine as his white tummy got rubbed. Ami undid the clasp holding the backpack on the floor shut, and a

grey flood poured out. The carpet of grey bodies and pinkish tails assembled in a semi-circle in front of her. Ignoring their survival instincts, the rats gazed up at their mistress, ignoring the struggling cat pawing at the air, unable to squirm from her grasp. With a mental command, Ami instructed her rodent spies to disperse through the city and provide her with visibility of the area that way. The ground rustled under the stampede of many tiny feet as the rats scurried away, disappearing into corners and shadows. It was too bad they couldn't fly, Ami pondered, scratching the white tomcat she was holding behind the ears. They would be able to cover much more territory that way. Yes. She would have to look into acquiring a flock of birds, or possibly bats. People noticed the swarm of rats spilling out from underneath the door, and their alarmed shouts told her that it was time to leave.

A flash of blue light deposited two figures in a cluttered corner behind a shed, shielded from sight by a withered wooden fence whose planks were taller than Ami and her companion. The area had been determined clear by one of Ami's scouts, who worked out quite well so far, aside from a few unfortunate incidents with the local cats. The blue-haired girl hadn't realised just how many bored felines were on the prowl in a coastal town.

The man she had transported let go of her waist and stepped away, straightening his peasant garb and smoothing his greying, wavy hair. A cane and a stubby, glued-on moustache completed Jered's disguise, transforming him from a shifty-looking adventurer into a poorly-groomed, elderly farmer. "Ah, sunlight," he commented, looking at the reddening disc that was hanging low in the afternoon sky. "Need to take advantage of any opportunity to enjoy it that I can."

"It's too bad we have to hide underground so much," Ami agreed. "Are you sure you'll be safe? Don't stay too long, the mercenaries-"

"Don't worry, I'll be back when the hourglass is empty," the disguised agent promised, tugging the small device hanging from a chain around his neck over the brim of his collar so that Ami could see the falling sand within. "That's too short for the White Hawks to

scry on us, find out where we are, and get the descriptions out to their field agents, especially if we keep moving. We'll be gone before they can react."

"I hope so. Please be careful!"

Jered smiled. "I'm always careful. I'm actually more worried about your plan. Are you sure it's wise to stray so close to the temple grounds?"

"It's something I have to do. I won't leave Jadeite high and dry," she said with conviction. "I need to know what will and what won't work before we start our operation."

"Well, at least they'll be expecting us already, so you tripping some alarms won't make the situation worse," Jered said as he started moving toward the gate leading onto the cobblestone-covered street, tapping his cane on the ground and walking with a hunch. "See you later."

Ami took that as her cue to see to her own duties, and departed in an aquamarine whirl of snow. When she rematerialised, she felt branches poke and prod into her skin through the black cloth of her shirt and trousers, but a few scratches were an acceptable price for the concealment that her current environment offered. The tree's heavily-leafed crown overlooked the white-painted wall enclosing the temple grounds. The building itself resembled the one Ami had visited in Evercalm, having a main dome from which a high clock tower grew. Walls, statues, and side buildings had all been constructed from the same white marble, and gleamed enticingly in the sunlight. Its surroundings seemed to double as the city's park, and she could see a few couples strolling across the gravel-covered paths that led past flower beds and ponds thick with water lilies. It was a place where Ami would have enjoyed sitting down with a good book underneath one of the trees and spending a relaxing afternoon. Unfortunately, she had a job to do.

Even this close to the temple, she couldn't locate Jadeite with her Keeper sight, but at least she could feel that he was still alive if she concentrated on him. In fact, she could see further into the building with her own eyes than with the tainted magic. She suppressed a

sneeze as a broad leaf brushed past her nostrils, summoned her visor, and zoomed in on the building's entrance, which was framed by two stone angels. Their sculpted wings touched at the tips, forming an arch above the doorway that could protect passers-by from rain. One of the rats hiding in the recently-mown grass scuttled toward the building at Ami's behest. She closed her eyes, following its progress entirely with her Keeper powers. The animal reached the white façade and twitched its nose, waiting for further instructions. She directed it toward the highly-polished brass gate of the temple, where it could hide between the toes of the left statue until one of the visitors pushed open the door's wings.

Soon, an opportunity presented itself, and the little beast hopped up the three steps and into the temple's inner hallway, just as it had been instructed. As soon as the rat crossed the temple's threshold, Ami's mental sight went dark. Opening her eyes to look at the creature through purely mundane means, she could see it flitting about the feet of two visitors who were kicking and shouting at it while trying to shoo it outside. The rat circled around their feet in blind animal panic, finding neither a hiding spot in the brightly-lit hall nor the will to defy its Keeper's instructions. Taking pity on her pet, Ami tugged at it telekinetically as it passed the gap between the door's wings through which she was watching. The small body zipped toward the door as if yanked by a chain, prompting elated cries from within. Ami, for her part, felt satisfied with what she had learned. Her powers still worked on her subordinates, provided that she could perceive them. She didn't have to test whether her Keeper magic, empowered by gold, would work inside or not, because she couldn't even finish concentrating in the right way to deploy a spell within the sacred building. Past experience from fighting the Reaper on top of the roof of a different temple hat taught her that her personal spells, independent of the dungeon heart, were still an option. This was just as well, because she didn't dare getting any closer than she already was. Leaving behind a few grains of wheat as a reward for her brave, grey-furred minion, the blue-haired girl disappeared from her perch.

"I managed to appropriate a floor plan of the place from the city

hall," Jered announced, proffering a rolled-up bundle of scrolls.

Ami took the papers from him and winced inwardly as she parsed his statement, translating the euphemism into the more blunt 'steal'. Well, it wasn't so much stealing as it was borrowing without permission, she excused her employees' action to herself. They would return it when they no longer needed it, and it was for a good cause. Looking over the lines and numbers drawn by the skilled hand of an architect, she said "Thanks, that will help. My rats were successful in mapping out the sewer system, but couldn't get into the temple proper. Hmm, from the looks of it, a few of the larger pipes run very close to the building's basement. Perfect for a stealthy entry."

"Unfortunately, that's entirely the wrong area of the building," the weasel-featured man dashed her hopes while he made his way over to the living room's couch. "Jadeite isn't being held near the basement, but in one of the cells on the third floor."

Ami flipped pages until she was looking at the right one, inspecting it with interest. "How did you find that out?"

"Met someone at a tavern. Inebriated soldiers are prone to gossip."

"Um, am I right in that the place was not originally intended to have prison cells?" the teenage Keeper asked as she identified the row of smaller rooms that could serve as a holding area. "They aren't located very deeply within the building. In fact, I can't see a single one that has more than two walls separating the inmates from freedom."

"Naturally. They are intended to restrain people under the influence of evil magic until they can be cured, not as a permanent residence." Jered scratched his chin, looking at the red-eyed girl warily. "I hope you aren't planning to go through the walls. They are rather thick."

Ami shook her head. "Not if I can avoid it," she said, raising her right hand to her mouth as she started considering her options. Her thoughts were racing when the first pieces of a plan started to take shape in her mind. Her eyes lit up eagerly. "I'll have to talk to the warlocks. Feel free to take a rest before the operation this night."

The empty street at a corner of the temple's enclosure flashed with blue light for an instant before fading back into the drab grey tones of a cloudy night. Guided by the rats hiding all around the city, Ami had chosen an arrival point away from the senses of both the citizens and the dogs they kept. Standing on top of the wall overlooking the small park, she turned to face the other figure who had arrived with her. Seeing a black silhouette move past one of the many lit windows, she ducked deeper behind the vegetation. With her visor, the blue-haired girl tracked movement in the garden. "There's the patrol. Wait until it is past and then hurry!" she whispered.

Both figures remained still and silent, watching the two guards and one monk from their hidden vantage point. After a while, Ami fidgeted and said tersely "You can let go of me now. *Especially* with the tentacle crawling up inside my trouser leg."

"Sorry. Habit." Tserk the tentacle monster shifted its bulk, unwrapping the slimy pseudopods that had been coiled around the slender girl's legs up to her waist since she had teleported both of them to this place.

Ami tensed, still watching the retreating back of the guards. "Now! Go!" Without further ado, she lifted the creature into the air, where it hung like a clump of nasty green-and black spaghetti from her telekinetic grip. Holding it close to the ground, she hovered it toward one of the ponds on temple grounds, much faster than it could have moved on its own. That was about as close as she dared go for fear of alerting the residents to their presence. Tserk oozed through the grass and toward the basin, slipping into the water without disturbing its surface much. A few heartbeats later, Ami could see the reeds move on the other side of the lily pond, but she had trouble picking out the flat, multi-limbed form of the monster due to its pattern and colouration. Its greenish-black surface was perfect camouflage for this kind of territory.

Tserk approached the walls of the temple, whose whiteness stood

out starkly in the darkness. While the slimy creature's dark tones were perfect for scurrying unseen from bush to bush, they would make its smooth skin stand out like a beacon during the next phase of the plan. Hiding behind a statue, the tentacle monster unfastened one of the many waterproof bags attached to its limbs, closed its eyes, and ripped it open. An energetic shake later, the creature was engulfed in a powdery white cloud of flour that adhered to its slime-coated body, painting it white. Ignoring the slight itching, Tserk stretched and extended its tendrils upwards, wrapping them around the neck of the statue. Blending in with the marble, the creature crept up the wall like an octopus prowling the ocean floor, using its tentacles to reach for footholds that would have been spaced too far apart for any normal climber. Without incident, the malleable creature pulled itself over the edge onto the domed roof and kept ascending toward the bell tower. The gap in the wall that allowed the massive bell to swing freely was wide enough for the tentacle monster to slip in. It wriggled forward until it was directly underneath the huge instrument suspended from a thick wooden bar. More interesting was the shaft directly underneath it, barely wide enough for a man to move along the handholds set into the wall. Of course it was blocked, but the cover was a simple grate, so that the rope used to ring the bell could dangle down through the gaps into the building below.

Mercury had planned for this, and her minion fished out two gold flasks from its bags. The tentacles handled these containers with great care, pouring some of the caustic liquid they contained onto the ends of the grate's bars, and then retreated to a safe distance. The iron frothed and bubbled under the action of the acid, and Tserk waited until enough of the metal had dissolved and pried the bars aside. Cautiously, the tentacle beast sprinkled a neutralising agent on the acid before squeezing itself through the gap, descending into the temple proper. It was doing rather well, it thought. Nobody was aware of its presence, for now, and the night was still young. There was the third floor - yes! An opening!

Like a snail emerging from its shell, the boneless monster emerged from a vent, preceded by a few grasping white pseudopods. It flopped onto the tiled floor, making a noise like a wet bag hitting the ground, and stretched a tentacle with an eye at its tip around the

corner, scanning for guards. Finding none, Tserk continued on its way. It was on the right floor, now it just needed to find the general. A tremendously loud, shrill noise startled the creature, making the tips of its tentacles twitch. As it looked around frantically for the source, it saw that the eyes of a small idol sitting on a pedestal were glowing golden, tracking the monster's progress while whistling the alarm. How unfair!

The sound of armoured boots striking the ground in rapid succession thundered through the temple's corridors, waking those inhabitants who had slept through the alarm. Intermingled with the heavy footfalls were the lighter steps of four of the fairies, who were hot on the heels of the guards. Behind the light-footed girls ran the priests, huffing and wheezing as they lifted their white and gold robes in order to keep up. Despite their best efforts, they remained at the back of the chase.

"Look up! It's underneath the ceiling!" a male voice shouted, and the soldier pointed at the multi-limbed, tentacled form that was brachiating through the rafters with the aid of its long limbs, swaying left and right like a pendulum as it swung from bar to bar, making itself a difficult target for the sporadic spells that were thrown at it.

"Damn, it's fast! How did it even get in here?" the lead guard asked, keeping an eye on the intruder even as a wall curtain came fluttering down, ripped off by a hasty tendril when the creature fled past it.

"Hey Cerasse, isn't that your special friend?"

"Do not worry, the second group will wait at its destination." a priest with half-closed eyes intoned, his voice vibrating with strange undertones.

Tserk unslung one of its remaining bags and hurled its content at its pursuers while maintaining its speed. A hail of small spherical objects pattered off of the breastplates and helmets of the front warriors, bouncing in all directions and doing no damage. One of the projectiles struck Dandel right in the forehead, causing her to cry out in pain and raise a hand to her indigo-coloured hair. "What the-?

Marbles? CAREFUL!"

A moment after the warning, arms flailed and armour rattled as the tiny orbs got underfoot, causing soldiers to trip and fall, who in turn tripped up more of the pursuers. From one instant to another, the group of hunters was a mess of angry bodies sprawled over each other.

"Ow! Once we catch that thing, we will have *words* with it!" Dandel promised, extricating her face from the armoured back of the guard who had broken her fall. A pre-emptive furious glare at her violet-haired sister silenced the incoming objection.

"Stop tarrying! After it!" A quickly uttered incantation from one of the grey-haired priests cleared the marbles away, and the chase resumed. The pursuers redoubled their efforts to shorten the distance that the tentacle-bristling creature had gained on them.

Lightning crackled around Anise's fingers. "Alright, I got a clear sho-"

Green-haired Tilia tackled the redhead to the ground. "Watch out, it's got a magic wand!" she screamed loudly enough for the others to hear. Forewarned, their formation spread out while their tentacled foe pointed a short, bone-like stick in their direction, using a few of the eyes in its back to aim. Working in much the same way as magical traps, these devices could store a few instances of a prepared spell and release it when a trigger condition was met. This particular wand released a blue pulse of light that widened as it raced down the corridor, but the monster's aim was off. Dandel's indigo eyes bugged out as a large section of the floor just ceased to exist, vanishing without fanfare and not even leaving smoke in its wake. The hunt came to a screeching stop, in some cases literally when metal-clad boots scratched over the ground, causing sparks. The foremost soldier's momentum carried him to the very edge of the hole, and he flailed with his arms for balance as he threatened to join the flabbergasted onlookers on the floor below by means of a four metre fall. Only the quick reaction of a companion saved him, pulling him back before he could topple completely.

"Light! What kind of spell can do *that*?" Anise asked in a small voice, eyes wide as she stared at the destruction.

"One we shouldn't let hit us! Keep going sisters! You others, find a different way!" Dandel spread her wings, clearing the obstacle, and hit the ground running. There just wasn't enough space to keep flying. The distinct humming noise of fairy glitter informed her that her sisters were right behind her, dashing after their elusive - and heavily armed - quarry. As if on cue, the tendril holding the wand took aim again. "SCATTER!" The indigo-haired fairy threw herself aside, diving behind a wooden bench on the left side of the hallway. Her sisters mirrored her action, flattening themselves against the wall and the floor. Except for one. "Cerasse, what are you doing?!"

"Don't worry, it wouldn't harm me!" the indigo-haired fae shouted self-confidently as she followed the tentacle monster, turning right at the corner around which the thing had just disappeared.

"You fool, it-"

"Eeek!"

Dandel could see a pulse of blue cross her path, coming from around the bend. A circular area of the wall, curtains included, just disappeared where the cold, azure glow struck it. Except for one section that remained intact, shaped like a cardboard cut-out of Cerasse's upper body. "NOOOOO!"

Feeling ill, the oldest of the fairies dashed forward to confirm her fears, her mind numb with worry and growing anger. She peered around the corner, and saw a lower body on the ground, legs still twitching as blood spurted forward. "N-no!" As her knees went weak, she heard a gagging noise behind her, followed by a whimper and Anise losing her lunch.

"What's going on? Why haven't they caught the intruder yet?" Camilla paced up and down in front of Jadeite's cell, throwing a glance from time to time at the unconscious form lying on the bed.

"I don't know, but the noises are coming our way," Roselle commented. "Don't worry, he's not going to get past us and the guards! And when the sorcerer here wakes up, he'll finally be free of

that evil Keeper's influence and grateful to us for saving him! It will be great!"

The two fully-armoured soldiers standing at attention to each side of the cell's door didn't indicate that they were paying any attention to the girls' chatter, keeping the narrow field of vision granted by the visor of their helmets pointed at the entrance.

"Say, why is there a wet trail on the ground?" blue-haired Melissa asked, pointing to the moisture glistening on the ivory-coloured tiles. She straightened her back and listened into the room. "Shush! Can you hear that?"

Tserk was in a bit of a bind. It had managed to enter the room and squeeze through the bars unnoticed, and was now hiding behind the dark general's bed, waiting for its invisibility to run out. Sure, zapping itself with the invisibility wand had allowed it to sneak past the guardians unnoticed, but doing so while relying only on its keen sense of smell and touch to avoid them had been slow and risky. The spell wasn't meant for use on living beings and caused blindness until it ran out, which it reliably did after a distressingly short time. More importantly, the tentacle monster couldn't see its compass, which it needed for the final phase of the rescue. So it waited, one tentacle holding a wand pointed at the back wall of Jadeite's cell, another holding the compass in front of a few eyes, a third hovering a finger's breadth above the blonde's lips, ready to shove a small pill down his throat, and a fourth holding a second pill above Tserk's own gaping maw.

On the second floor, priests and acolytes were staring up at the smooth-edged hole in the ceiling at which an armoured figure on all fours was prodding, apparently encountering resistance. Their muttering reached new heights when the missing piece slowly shimmered back into visibility and they realised how they had been tricked.

In the third floor corridor, Dandel, Anise, and Tilia were staring with various degrees of horror, relief, and queasiness at the strange apparition that crept around on the floor. Its lower body was that of their sister Cerasse, but the missing upper body was nothing but a grotesque network of pulsating veins and capillaries, with a bigger, beating knot where the heart should be. "Girls? Girls, what's going on? I can't see!"

A change went through the figure, and layers of bone and flesh appeared around the redness, transparent at first, but quickly solidifying. "Cerasse! You are alive and not some horrible undead monster! Thank the Light!" Before the confused violet-haired fae could make sense of the redhead's statement, she was caught in a hug that threatened to cut off her breath. It only got worse when her other sisters joined in.

As soon as Tserk noticed parts of his vision returning, it jammed the pill into the unconscious Jadeite's mouth, pushing down hard enough for the capsule to burst and disgorge its contents.

"Look!" A startled female cry went through the room, causing the others to turn around, just in time to see their patient's head jerk and a large, writhing heap of tentacles appear from out of nowhere.

Tserk fired his wand, turning a huge circle of the cell's wall invisible. Staring down at the compass, it mentally projected as loudly as it could *"TWELVE DEGREES NORTH! HURRY!"* and bit down on its own capsule. If the guards staring in through the bar were startled by the sudden appearance of what looked like an alternate exit in the back wall of the cell, they didn't let it distract them and took aim. The ingested potion started to act on both Jadeite and his rescuer.

"What? No!" Melissa cried in alarm, seeing the dark grey uniform of the curly-haired hunk deflate, empty. She was rather less concerned for the well-being of the tentacled intruder, who disappeared from the path of her lightning bolt in a similar way, its equipment clattering to the ground. The next unwelcome surprise for the fairies came when the temple's exterior wall disappeared and they could see the night sky through the missing part of the cell. Most alarming was the

black-dressed and blue-haired female figure floating in front of the opening, dropping a wand similar to the one that the monster had used, and staring at them. The crimson light from her eyes was somewhat muted by the glass-like visor covering the upper part of her face, but the fairies had no difficulties recognising her.

"Keeper Mercury!" Roselle shouted, glaring at the figure who clapped her hands together mockingly. Together with her sisters, the orange-haired fairy unleashed a brilliant lightning bolt, but instead of reaching the evil sorceress, the crackling electricity encountered an invisible obstacle where the wall should be, spraying the trio with hot dust. The enemy smiled at them briefly before disappearing in a twister of snowflakes and aquamarine light.

Tense like a bowstring, Ami teleported in front of the indicated location as soon as she heard her agent's mental cry, adrenaline racing through her veins. A quick shot from the bought wand turned a part of the temple's exterior marble invisible and revealed a section of the third floor. She immediately zeroed in on the round hole in one of the walls, setting her visor to maximum amplification as she searched the cell for her minions, completely ignoring the people beyond its bars. There! She cupped her hands, forming a small globe of her own territory, and transported her transformed minions inside. Only when she felt the weight of the two baby mice on her palm did she resume breathing. A radiant smile crept onto her features, caused by the relief that flooded like a warm infusion through every fibre of her being. Mission accomplished!

Wasting no time, Ami teleported back to her dungeon. "Cathy! Jered! Snyder! It worked!" she cried out in exultation - and was promptly buried in a heap of naked flesh and tentacles when the short-lived transformative potion wore off and its recipients resumed their normal shape and weight.

Last edited: Sep 23, 2017

Reinforcements

Originally on 2010-04-27T01:47:00

"Where did they go? How did they escape?" In the temple, Camilla stared at the empty cell in confusion. "Melissa, find them!" The short blonde fae turned to face the hallway, hearing the sound of running footsteps closing in.

"Camilla, Melissa, Roselle! Did the tentacle monster come this way?" Dandel, the indigo-haired fairy sister, was in the lead and spotted the deserted cell behind the guards first. Her jaw dropped. "What? Where's the prisoner?"

While a soldier unlocked the cell door and pulled the squeaking metal gate open, the other fairies formed a half circle around the three who had been here all the time, exchanging baffled glances as they spotted the empty grey uniform lying on the bed.

"Gone," Roselle answered, shrugging her shoulders and looking apologetic. "We don't really know how. One moment, we were guarding the cell, the next, there was a tentacle monster in there and it shouted something and there was a hole going through the walls and both disappeared and then Keeper Mercury showed up and we blasted her, but it didn't work!"

"Slow down, slow down. It had an invisibility wand, we think." Dandel peered past the orange-haired fae, who was catching her breath after her long outburst, and inspected the interior of the cell. "The prisoner was still unconscious, right? If so, he might still be nearby. Melissa, go find a scrying pool and track him! Tilia, what's that stuff there on the floor?"

While the oldest fairy informed her sisters about what had happened during the chase, the green-haired, winged girl entered the room and squatted down, taking a look at the objects that remained in a vague circle where the intruder had disappeared. It was a collection of various bags and flasks, slightly slimy from being attached to the tentacle monster. A flicker of movement behind her made her whirl

around, but it was just the circular hole in the wall becoming visible once more and showing three shallow and scorched indentations where the sisters' attacks had failed to strike at the enemy Keeper.

Tilia resumed her scrutiny of the tentacle monster's belongings, prodding at the different containers with all due caution. One never knew what kinds of booby traps or dangerous substances the servants of evil carried with them. Most of the oiled leather bags appeared to be empty. A strange white powder trickled out of one, while a heavier one contained a golden flask, also empty. As the green-haired girl raised the expensive bottle to her nose and sniffed, wondering what would warrant an expensive receptacle like that, she heard one of her sisters join her, walking with soft-soled steps. The violet-haired fae picked up the monster's wand and scrutinised it. "Hmm, not particularly convincing work. Looks like one of those illegal artefacts you'd find on the black market, crafted on the sly by apprentices trying to make a few quick coins on the side."

"Or by a Keeper's warlock minions working with little supervision and even less regulation," Anise harrumphed. "How could we lose to that disgusting creature? I can't believe it!" She punched the wall in anger, right next to where it bore the scars of the lightning attack. "Hey Camilla, what are you doing with that uniform?"

The cute blonde stopped folding up the grey garment in question. "I was just going to keep it safe for when we save him again! He'll probably want it back, it's made of very nice cloth."

"Silly, our ship leaves tomorrow! We won't be seeing him again if everything goes right!"

"Oh." The youngest sister's face fell, but a moment later, she resumed her work, smiling brightly. "I'll keep this as a souvenir, then!"

"That's a brazen Keeper, to dare operate so close to a temple," one of the armoured guards commented. The helmet concealed his face, but his tone of voice sounded worried.

"Either that, or the prisoner was more valuable to her than we assumed," one of the old priests, who had arrived just in time to

catch the tail end of the conversation, shared his interpretation.

"Well, she mentioned that she was in love with him," Roselle said, remembering the conversion she and her sister had had with the blue-haired villain when they had been her 'guests'. "Obsession is probably more like it. So, did you find out how the tentacle thing got in here yet?" The orange-haired fairy asked Dandel, who was chatting with the unhappy-looking holy men.

"Not yet, we have a greater problem. The priests confirm that she used Keeper transport to get her minions out once she had line of sight!"

"So?"

"That means she has some territory in the area that's big enough to deposit them on!"

"You mean there's a dungeon in the vicinity?" One of the guards asked with sudden dread.

"That is what the evidence points to," a grey-bearded priest in white and golden robes confirmed, his grandfatherly face looking chagrined.

"I will inform our Baron at once," another guard said, "there's no time to lose, we must get the search organised immediately! Excuse me," shouldering past the gawkers who were gathering in the hallway, she left at a run. The heavy footsteps clattering on the marble floor tiles sent ripples through the water-filled bowl that Melissa was murmuring and making hand signs over, and caused the blue-haired fairy to frown at the disturbance. While she waited for the surface to calm, the more curious onlookers approached, crowding around her and the wooden pedestal that the porcelain bowl was resting on.

"Got anything yet?" Anise asked as she fluttered her wings, climbing to a point just underneath the ceiling to get a better view of the scrying attempt, straight over the heads of the others. Thus, when the liquid changed to no longer show a reflection of the rafters, she was one of the first to notice. "Eeek! That's gross!"

A mutter went through the crowd as the watchers, caught off-guard by the unexpected scene, processed what they were seeing. The water showed the prisoner, of course, and also the intruder and dread Keeper Mercury herself. The latter demonstrating that her reputation for deviance was well-deserved, as she was locked in a three-way embrace with the tentacle monster and the poor prisoner, who wasn't wearing a stitch of clothing. Cheeks burning, Melissa jostled the basin, disrupting the vision. "Oh. Oh Light, that poor man." Whatever else she said was lost in the noises of revulsion, shock, and outrage coming from the crowd.

Queen Beryl stared at the black crystal ball hovering in front of her, brows furrowed in displeasure. She had not been able to spy on Jadeite for some time now, and since she prided herself on her skill with the scrying device, this vexed her greatly. With angrily-clenched teeth, she waved her long, pale fingers over the magical sphere once again, and this time, an image appeared within. With a triumphant grin, the redhead relaxed and narrowed her eyes at the scene. What had her traitorous dark general felt so important to hide from her? Curious, Beryl leaned closer over the glowing orb. Orange eyes blinked once before widening in disbelief at the sight of Jadeite, without a stitch of clothing, wrapped in a bundle of what looked like squirming tentacles. A mop of short blue hair that could only belong to Sailor Mercury poked out from the bottom of the pile, buried underneath both the bare-skinned blond, and whatever the wriggling, slimy monstrosity was. A brief shudder of revulsion went through the Queen's body, starting at the spike-sporting shoulders and travelling down. That was more than she had ever wanted to learn about that traitor. She let the picture fade away and decided that she was going to check again at a later time. Much, much later.

Ami, who hadn't counted on the transformation potion to be *this* short-lived, even knowing that each pill contained just a minor dose, let out a squeal of surprise when the weight of the tentacle beast and Jadeite suddenly pinned her back to the carpet. With the breath knocked out of her, she didn't react for a moment, disoriented by the fall. Which promptly led to her discovery by Snyder, Jered and

Cathy, whose eyes seemed to bug out at the display.

"Already started the welcome back party, have you?" Jered teased with a wink, which snapped the blue-haired girl out of her daze and allowed her to realize just what the situation was looking like.

"Eeeep!" The skin of her cheeks suddenly felt hot like a furnace, and she knew that their redness would have put a tomato to shame right now. Fortunately, being a Keeper had its advantages, and the naked Jadeite disappeared from the pile, ferried into his bed by her transportation ability. With the body of the dark general gone, Tserk dropped onto her stomach, but this was a blow she had anticipated. She levitated the tentacled beast off of herself before tucking the curly-haired blond in properly. If she took a bit longer than necessary to pull the covers over his sleeping form to protect his modesty, well, that was all professional concern for his well-being. She had to check if he was uninjured, right? With a groan, Ami got up, taking Cathy's helpfully-extended hand, and prepared to face her advisers inevitable teasing.

"Mercury? Jadeite has just awakened, you can stop fretting now," Snyder said, opening the door to the dark general's bedroom from within and poking his head out through the gap.

Ami stopped pacing up and down the corridor and turned around so fast that she barely avoided giving herself whiplash. "Really? Is he all right?" A radiant smile blossomed on her face as she stepped closer, and a slight blush appeared on her cheeks. "Good work keeping an eye on him like that for hours." She put her hands together in front of her legs and inclined her head slightly. "I apologise for being such a pain and asking about his health every few minutes. Thank you for remaining calm and patient."

Snyder waved his hand dismissively. "Ahem, there's no need to apologize. I can understand that you were worried about him, but nothing at the temple-"

"Augh! What in the Great Ruler's name did these fools do to me?" Jadeite's angry shout penetrated the walls, startling them both.

Snyder blinked as he suddenly could no longer see Mercury, then realised that she had transported herself upon hearing the voice.

"Jadeite, wha-"Ami appeared at Jadeite's side and quickly turned around when she saw that he was sitting up in his bed, bare chested and with his covers pooling around him, and holding his head with both hands. "What happened?" she asked, blushing and feeling her heart beat rapidly.

"I have a horrible headache from those stupid priests' cleansing ritual," the dark general complained, sounding almost whiny.

"A cleansing ritual? What for?"

"Oh, those scatterbrained fairies were going on about how you were mind-controlling me and how I needed to be freed from your evil influence. So the priests had a look at me and detected my conditioning for Dark Kingdom style dark magic. You know, what you had to build up to learn how to teleport, too. Of course, the imbeciles mistook it for evidence of a mind control spell and went ahead with their ceremony."

"Are you all right?"

"My magical pathways are clogged with light magic residue, which is causing my headache and generally making a mess of things, but I should be able to clear that out soon enough."

"I'm relieved to hear that." Ami was silent for a moment, keeping her features neutral, "Um, did their ritual break any evil spells on you?" Hearing Jadeite snort, she quickly added "What I mean is that Beryl could have put some controls on you, or maybe someone else in the Dark Kingdom...?" Part of her hoped that the answer was 'yes' and that the curly-haired blond wasn't evil by choice. That would make things so much easier. Another part feared that he might no longer be himself, if that was the case.

"You are asking whether Beryl brainwashed me?" Jadeite sounded more amused than offended by the notion and shrugged, not that Ami could see the motion with her back turned. "I suppose it's possible, but I don't feel any different. I have been a general of the

Dark Kingdom for so long that I probably wouldn't remember a time before it even if some spell was broken. So don't expect me to suddenly turn into a knight in shining armour."

"Not going to rescue any more princesses from dragons, then?" Ami joked, hiding her unease at the reminder of just how *old* Jadeite was when compared to her. Yet another point on the list of reasons why falling in love with a dark general was a bad idea. "So you can't remember your childhood? That's so sad."

Cloth rustled behind her, and she heard the bed's springs squeak. "I'm decent now," the dark general said, opting to ignore her comment. Ami turned around and saw that he was dressed in his regular grey uniform again - which must have been conjured, as his old one had been left behind at the temple. Not that there was anything wrong with conjured clothing, of course, provided that the conjurer had enough skill to make it look good. Unless it came into contact with Snyder's enchanted water, which had already happened twice to Ami, resulting in absolute mortification for the shy teenager. She should spare him such an experience if it was in her power. "I think you need to see a tailor in the near future," she said thoughtfully, prompting the blond to raise his eyebrows because of the sudden change of topic and implicit criticism of his apparel.

"No, leave them alone," Ami decided, walking swiftly through the corridor that led to the temple at the very prow of the iceberg. "If the fairies are already waiting for a ship home, there's no need to bother them any more than we already did. I have caused them enough trouble already."

"As you wish. I'm sure we will run into more blockade ships from the Shining Concord Empire on the way. We will find others to interrogate." Jadeite said, pausing in his stride to let her walk through an arched door too narrow for them to enter side-by-side.

"Wow. This place has sure changed," Ami said letting her crimson gaze wander over the twisting, murals that covered the walls of her temple, forming spirals that looked like a mix between frost patterns and bones. Where sandstone tones had dominated before, now the

walls shimmered dark grey, blue, and violet, and were covered with an oily sheen. The most dramatic change had to be the large, hollow-eyed skull that grew organically from the back wall, looking twisted and wrong, as if it belonged to some prehistoric monstrosity. The crude formation reminded Ami of the sculpture above Metallia's cocoon, which she had seen through the crystal ball, and she felt her hackles rise.

Jadeite didn't seem nearly as intimidated by the ambience. He even stopped to look at his dim reflection in the vein-infused floor tiles. "Reminds me of home," he commented as he walked in after Mercury. Two pairs of eyes turned toward the square pool in the centre of the room. While the stone basin now matched the general theme of the room, the watery depths remained completely unchanged, emitting a faint glow and hypnotic, barely audible whispers.

Ami stood in front of the waters, gazing into the bottomless depths. Movement to her left informed her that Jadeite had taken position right next to her and was mirroring her actions. "All right. I am going to demonstrate Queen Metallia's spell." Here, in the temple dedicated to the dark goddess, Ami felt it safer to attach the 'Queen' honorific to her name. Comatose as Metallia might be, she had demonstrated a certain level of awareness, and Ami had had enough trouble with vexed deities to last her a lifetime. She took a deep breath and intoned the first syllables of the spell, not taking her eyes from the eldritch pool.

Immediately, she could feel her perception expand and experienced a brief sensation of vertigo as her point of view shifted, diving in free-fall into the well below. She beheld a chaotic vista that was incomprehensible to the human senses. They just weren't meant to function in a place where walking in a circle didn't mean that you ended up back at the point of origin. Ami didn't feel particularly concerned about her sanity, even though her mind was not able to make sense of the greyish geometry that danced before her, following the rules of the real world only loosely. The confusing sensory input simply made her dizzy, but she felt that, given enough time, she might be able to understand the patterns behind them, even if her senses would never be able to cope with them.

Fortunately, her spell rendered navigating this space on her own unnecessary. A literal red thread was leading off in the distance, disappearing into cloudy fog. The young Keeper followed this guide for a few minutes until it led her to a jagged crystal, slightly larger than a human, which contained a figure frozen within its transparent material. Ami's heart skipped a beat. The spell was working! Instinctively knowing what to do, she started tugging the object back the way she had come, moving it centimetre by centimetre through pure exertion of will.

A strong arm slipped around Ami's shoulders and steadied her in the real world, and she felt grateful for the gesture, even if the sensation of being in two places at once was novel and disorienting. After an indeterminate time of hard work, she was drenched in sweat and breathing hard. A final shove, and her point of view changed back to her own eyes - just in time to see the top of the crystal emerge from a spiralling whirlpool. With a determined telekinetic pull, she freed the slightly scorched, gem-like structure from the well and set it down on the ground.

"Are you all right?" Jadeite's question reminded Ami that he still had his arm around her. "You looked as if you were going to keel over for a moment there."

"I-I'm fine," the blue-haired girl panted. "This was more exhausting than I expected." She held onto one of the faded blue pillars as she caught her breath. With a tinge of disappointment, she felt the dark general let go of her and approach the crystal. He used one gloved hand to rub the soot off of its surface and looked at the prisoner inside. "Hey, I know this one! She was the last one I took on a mission before Beryl discarded me!"

"Oh?" Now curious, Ami took stock of the creature inside the crystal. The grey-skinned female looked rather lizard-like with her snake-like tail and the clawed feet. Like queen Beryl, she had red hair, but her fangs were much longer and her green dress much shorter.

"Her name is Mareki. She's a reasonable fighter, likes to go into close combat and can shoot jets of water from her mouth," the grey-uniformed man summarised her most distinguishing features. "She must have been imprisoned after me, so she should still be mostly

sane."

"Very well. I'll free her, then." Ami's right hand turned shadowy, as if the limb was half-way through a possession spell, and she reached into the crystal. As soon as she touched the motionless figure within, she could hear the youma babble to herself, a long litany of anger and despair.

"Hate hate hate! Not my fault! Unfair unfair unfair! Will-

"Um, Excuse me?"

The senseless gibbering stopped, and there was surprised silence.*"Ahaha! I'm starting to hallucinate already? I would have thought I'd last longer! Oh well, at least now I'll have someone to talk to!"*

"I'm real, and I'm an enemy of Queen Beryl. Will you work for me in exchange for your freedom?" Ami felt a bit guilty at tricking the creature into binding herself to Ami's dungeon heart like that, as the teenager would have felt compelled to free her either way. The blue-haired girl calmed her conscience by reminding herself that the dungeon heart didn't actually force employees to obey her and just gave her a way to control such potentially dangerous creatures as youma.

"Yes! Of course! Of course I will!" Mareki pounced at the opportunity. *"Too bad this is just a fantasy,"* she added wistfully. Her agreement was enough for the Keeper magic to seal the deal, and Ami transported the sceptical youma out of its prison. The monster staggered when she suddenly found herself free of the confining crystal. Gravity? She sank to all fours, crouching like an animal, with her tail raised high as her head whipped left and right, drinking in the sights. "I'm free? It's true? I'm free!" The creature's frantic head movements slowed down as her vision cleared, unaccustomed to the brightness after weeks of sensory deprivation. She spotted two figures with her in the room, and immediately dismissed the short, red-eyed female leaning against a pillar as unimportant. Her eyes widened as she recognised the curly-haired blond standing next to a wall with his arm crossed.

Jadeite's smirk turned into a startled frown as the youma pounced like a panther, extending her claws and snarling in rage. "You! My suffering is all the fault of your incompetence!"

To the youma's shock, her lunge came to a sudden stop when a giant hand made of water appeared out of nowhere and caught her in a vice-like grip. An instant later, the room blurred, and she felt her back smack hard into the wall, with the watery limb pressing down on her.

"I will have none of this! You are not allowed to hurt any of my employees! Is that understood?" The blue-haired human that Mareki had considered unimportant was glaring at her with eyes like red bonfires. The youma considered the crushing pressure on her chest, then the fact that keeping it up didn't seem to cost the girl any effort. "Err, sorry?"

"See that it doesn't happen again," Ami commanded firmly.

The youma recognised the voice as belonging to the one who had freed her. "It won't," she promised quickly. The hand disappeared, and the monster slid to the ground. "If you don't mind me asking, whom am I working for now?"

"I am Sailor Mercury."

Mareki stared, mouth agape. "*Sailor* Mercury? As in sailor senshi?"

Ami nodded, not taking her eyes off of the youma.

"I agreed to serve a sailor senshi?" the lizard-like youma's eyes darted to Jadeite. "Wait, *he's* working for you? I don't believe it." She snorted, then broke into a fit of laughter that had her gasping for breath.

"She does have the support of our Great Ruler, or neither of us would be here right now," Jadeite pointed out, which shut the youma up. He turned toward Ami, noticing the sheen of perspiration on her brow. "Mercury, you look tired. I'll get her settled in, why don't you rest for a while?"

Ami hesitated because she had a lot of work to do. Like finding out

why Metallia favoured one kind of life energy over another. However, when her knees shook from weakness, she agreed that a short break would be the best course of action.

"Keeper, we have discovered something unexpected!" The elongated silhouette of one of Ami's warlocks blocked the arching doorway. He inclined his head respectfully, and the stiff collar of his robe remained standing, framing it like horns. The glowing crystal ball clutched to his chest illuminated the crumbs marring the purple robe. Clearly, this wizard had developed a taste for the sweet pastries that were an outcome of planting sugar beets in one of the accelerated farms.

Ami looked up from her reading material, startled by the unexpected intrusion into her workroom. She was sitting behind a desk that was half-buried in open tomes, but still managed to look neat despite the clutter. Blinking at the visitor and noticing the excitement on the his clean-shaved face, Ami cautiously smiled at him. "Yes? What did you find out?"

"May I come in?" At Ami's nod, he stepped in front of the wooden desk, searching in vain for a free spot to put the spherical device down. "See for yourself."

Ami removed one of the books and took the proffered crystal ball, feeling a tingle when her fingers closed around the smooth surface, which indicated that it was drawing on her magic now, rather than the warlock's. Within, she could see a landscape that belonged to the Avatar Islands, the fiery clouds reflecting on the surface of the ocean and making it look like a giant pool of blood left no doubt about that. At first glance, it looked just like one of the many smaller islands around the outskirts of the main continent. Given the vampires' difficulties with crossing water, digging the initial beachhead into one of those was a logical choice. Maybe this one was particularly suitable for some reason? Ami zoomed in closer onto the bleak rocks and greyish sand beaches. The place consisted almost completely of a ragged mountain pervaded by deep and winding crevasses. As usual, the lowest depressions were filled with thick, grey fog that flowed like chunky soup through the valleys. At a

second glance, the island did look a bit less devastated than the rest of the region, as there was no lava. Ami could make out a few thorny bushes that stubbornly clung to life, sprouting green leaves that survived despite the ash covering that the persistent wind from the mainland kept reapplying. If this denoted that the enemy's power was weaker here, it was definitely worth a second look, but that sounded like a weak reason for one of the warlocks to disturb her. Ami inspected the vision in the crystal even closer, and her eyes widened as she spotted an overlooked detail. There, on the sandy beach, were footsteps. Not human ones, but recent, or the tide would have washed them away already. She looked up in amazement. "There are survivors?"

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Mysterious Island

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The cosy room that served as Ami's command centre felt very full with the six people sitting in a semi-circle around the central table, watching the image on the white-painted back wall. In washed-out colours, the projection pictured a pyramid-shaped mountain rising from a sea of blood originating from the crystal ball in front of the blue-haired girl. She was sitting in the central chair, directly across from the projection, and slid her hands over the glowing orb's smooth surface as she tried to bring both the island and the continent behind it into focus. Snyder's arm bumped into her left elbow as he edged away further from Mareki, feeling unease at sitting so close to the green-dressed youma, even if she had taken the guise of a red-haired human woman for the moment. Tails and heavy wooden chairs didn't mix. Ironically, the monster was unknowingly emulating the acolyte, leaning as far away from Jadeite as the limited space allowed. The dark general, who sat with his arms crossed at the outermost left of the group, cast a shadow over the wallpaper-like map behind him. He smirked as the youma cringed upon noticing his gaze shift toward her for a moment and avoided looking him in the eyes. As soon as Mercury had left the creature in his care, he had shown her exactly why youma did not attempt to attack dark generals, and the lesson was still fresh in her mind.

Ami remained blissfully unaware of the dynamics to her left because she had enough space on her right. Cathy's and Jered's seats were so close that they touched each other, leaving plenty of room for the blue-haired girl. Jered sat on the outer right, where the bookshelves were within arms reach. He wasn't doing the budget though, but looking at the dirty-looking beach in the picture. "Can you zoom in closer, please? I'd like to see that footprint for myself," he asked, sounding curious.

Ami nodded and brought the thin strip of muddy grey sand into focus, moving the point of view around for a while as she sought the

tracks. At first, she got side-tracked by a strange, slimy algae that somewhat resembled the shape of a foot, then an odd rock, and a bit later a dead fish. After long enough for her companions to become restless, she finally located the depression in the ground, much closer to the rising tide than it had been the last time she had seen it.

The weasel-featured man only threw a short glance at the eroding imprint. "Troll footprint," he declared without hesitation. "They are rather easy to distinguish. Slightly crooked, weight resting near the toes."

"What's a troll?" Mareki whispered, poking Snyder in the side with a finger as to get his attention. The redhead looked comically uncomfortable as her breath stroked over his ear, but he was the only available option. She shuddered at the idea of questioning Jadeite, especially when he looked tired enough to have dark rings under his eyes after working at the temple, doing whatever it was that Mercury had told him to do. Drawing the Keeper's attention by raising her voice seemed likewise a bad idea. If the blond general was taking orders from the young-looking girl, she had to be even more powerful than him.

Snyder inched away from the youma, stood up with swishing robes and brought the chair between himself and the unholy creature. "I shall get you a book," he blurted out, pointing at the shelf he hurried toward in an attempt to make his retreat look more dignified. He stopped as another thought entered his mind. Looking at Mercury and pointing at the map on the wall, he said

"Ahem. It would appear as if there is no portal anywhere on that island." He scratched his chin. "None that we know about, in any case. This leads me to wonder what a troll would be doing in an inhospitable place like that."

"Declining the privilege of becoming a vampire snack, maybe," Cathy guessed. The scar-faced blonde leaned back in her chair, putting her hands behind her head as she stretched. Her gaze met that of the youma. "What is it? You keep throwing glances at me when you think I'm not looking!" she challenged.

Caught red-handed, Mareki decided that she might as well ask what she wanted to know directly. "I'm trying to figure out what exactly you are. You dress like a sailor senshi, and I can feel some similar magic from you, but I'm not familiar with any celestial object that's called 'Cathy'."

The blonde warrior looked to Mercury, unsure how much she could tell the youma.

"There is no need for secrecy, she is going to find out when I take her along later anyway," Ami said, removing her hands from the crystal ball. The image on the wall faded away, and the lights came back on at the flick of a switch. "Cathy is currently borrowing my powers," Ami continued, drawing a confused look from the disguised youma. "That uniform is the one I usually wear as Sailor Mercury."

"You exchanged clothes?" she asked, alternating between looking at the blue-haired girl and at the blonde, and trying to account for the size difference.

"No, that's not it," Ami quickly shook her head. "The clothes are generated by the transformation into sailor senshi form, which also gives her the same enchantments and the ability to draw on my power source. The easiest way to think of it is her currently being a deputy senshi of Mercury."

"You can endow others with your power like that?" The amazed youma's yellow eyes flashed with greed as she remembered the Keeper's statement of her finding out anyway. "Are you going to empower me?"

"I'm afraid it's not that easy," Ami answered, suppressing an instinctive flinch as Mareki stared at her like a hungry dog would stare at a succulent piece of meat. "You'll learn more about it later. But first, let's get back on topic." Ami gestured, and the lights dimmed, allowing a projection of the island, seen from the air, to become visible on the wall.

Jered was the first to speak as Ami looked into the round. "I concur with Cathy. I think the fact that the footsteps were on the side furthest away from the mainland supports her theory."

"There is also the possibility that the troll is a lookout, searching for ships," Snyder brought up. "Maybe whoever is there is just shipwrecked."

"Yes, because a lookout is going to stand at the beach, rather than on top of the mountain from where he could see much farther," Cathy sighed. The redhead shot her an irritated glance from the corner of his brown eyes, but didn't try to defend his assumption. He had yet to return to his seat.

"We shouldn't forget that there are living plants on the island," Ami pointed out. "That wouldn't be the case if whoever is on the island was there by accident, or even worse, aligned with Zarekos. I just have to go check it out!"

Cathy frowned, tightening her grip on Jered's right wrist. "Personally? I don't like the idea of you putting yourself into danger again. We could just keep scrying the place," the female warrior suggested.

"The island is a bit too big for that to be practical, especially if the survivor is hiding underground." Ami objected. The ragged mountain was a bit less than ten kilometres long and wide, but it would still take ages to check every foggy valley and deep crack in the mountainside. "My visor has a much better chance of discovering any survivors."

The blonde inclined her head in defeat. "Very well. But be careful, okay?"

"Don't worry, I'll take her along." Ami turned to Mareki, smiling. Now it was the youma's turn to feel uncomfortable as those crimson lights bored into her. "Mareki, can you teleport?"

"I have never studied it," the fake redhead replied, hoping that this wouldn't lead to some kind of arbitrary punishment. So far, this Sailor Mercury didn't seem as intense as Beryl, and she didn't have the queen's intimidating presence, but Mareki hadn't been around her long enough to make any judgement.

Jadeite, hand still in front of his mouth from stifling a yawn,

understood what Mercury wanted to know. "She's a youma. There's no risk of her exploding from trying to channel dark magic the wrong way."

"Thank you. Well, Mareki," Ami put the crystal ball aside and grinned mischievously over the table at the creature, "you were interested in obtaining my powers, weren't you? I'll need to possess you, is that fine with you?"

"P-possess?" the youma's eyes widened in alarm.

"Don't worry, it's not harmful. I'll just be borrowing your body for some time. You'll still be watching from the back of your mind," Ami promised.

Mareki knew of course what possession was. Nephrite was rumoured to have the ability, after all. "And she did that to you too?" She asked, pointing her index finger at Cathy, who nodded.

"Just do it," Jadeite ordered, too tired to have a reluctant youma waste any more of his time.

"Yes, Sir," Mareki replied on ingrained reflex and noted that Sailor Mercury was throwing the dark general a reproachful look.

"Ready?" the blue-haired girl asked, smiling encouragingly. At the youma's near imperceptible nod, she changed into a mass of black lightning that struck the creature head on and rippled over its skin for a moment before sinking in. Mareki's eyes glowed like red coals, and her posture became less tense as Ami gained a feel for the body. She immediately knew that something was wrong when she felt her skin crawl and her muscles shift around her bones, which were making audible grinding noises while they deformed, too. Pupils not her own turned into little, frightened pinpricks as she staggered from the changes. She was certain that she had cast the possession spell perfectly, the same way she had many times before and exactly as she had studied it. While the young Keeper's experience with inhabiting different bodies was limited, she was certain that *this* wasn't supposed to happen. With an effort of will, she cancelled the spell, turning into a tar-like blob of black lightning that shot from the youma's chest. In Ami's haste to get out, the semi-

solid shape turning back into her own body slammed into the edge of the wooden table, leaving her bent over at the waist. She resumed a fully material state with her face plastered to the various maps of the Avatar islands strewn about the round table's surface. Four pairs of eyes blinked down at the blue-haired girl whose upper body was lying between their notes, and Ami could hear a soft, amused snort from Jered's direction. With a groan, she stood up and brushed away a map that had adhered to the sweaty skin of her left cheek. She had no time for distractions like that. Whirling around so fast that she bumped into the table again, she focused her worried gaze on the youma, whose frame was stretching.

"Mareki, what happened? Are you all right? I'm very sorry about this!" Ami hoped that she hadn't inadvertently hurt her newest hireling.

"...feeling woozy..." the scratchy voice of the youma replied. She swayed, but looked already much the same grey-skinned, green-haired reptilian monster as she had before. Only her fingertips were still changing, growing back into vicious claws.

"If you ask me, it looked as if she was transforming to become more like you," Cathy commented, recovering quicker from her surprise than the others.

Ami didn't take her eyes off the youma, who no longer had to lean on a chair to steady herself. Relieved that the change hadn't been permanent, the blue-haired girl asked. "But why did this happen?"

"A youma's body is made of magic and as much defined by its spirit as by its composition," Jadeite explained, "I guess that when a new spirit is in the body, it changes to match. Though it's hard to tell if the result is what you would look like as a youma, or a hybrid form."

"Is it harmful?" the blue-haired girl wanted to know.

"It shouldn't be. Youma shapes are fairly malleable. Have another go," the curly-haired blond suggested, gesturing toward the recovering monster with a white-gloved hand. "Mareki, get ready."

"Yes, *sir*", the youma drawled, standing at attention with a mock

salute as she shot the dark general a rebellious glare behind Mercury's back. The blue-haired girl nodded once and smiled in Jadeite's direction. The muscles around her jaw firmed in determination as she prepared to brave the strange the disconcerting sensation of her flesh crawling and her legs feeling as if they had turned to putty once more. A heartbeat later, she turned into coal-coloured lightning that crawled over the youma, looking like cracks on her gypsum-coloured skin before seeping into the tissues below.

With Mareki's eyes, Ami watched the faces of her advisers as they observed her transformation. She tried to keep her breathing even and her muscles relaxed even as they writhed around in her limbs. An amused grin played around Jered's lips, Jadeite cocked his head as he watched, Cathy leaned forward curiously, and Snyder's eyebrows were rising. To Ami's relief, none of their features displayed disgust or alarm, which meant that she wasn't mutating into something horrible. After a bit less than ten seconds, the odd tugs and twitches stopped, and she dared move again. Her first action was summoning a full-length mirror from her room. The polished glass rattled in its frame as it landed on the ground in an upright position, but the impact wasn't hard enough to make the mirror shatter and spray sharp shards all over the maroon carpet.

Ami peered at her reflection. The body she was wearing was an odd fusion of her and Mareki's features. She was shorter than the youma had been, and her eyes were the usual glowing red pools she had come to expect. The cheekbones were softer, the face more rounded and younger looking. "Very intersh- ow!" Ami grimaced, sliding the tongue she had just bitten over the two long fangs protruding from her gums. These would take some getting used to. Shouldn't the youma's knowledge of the body prevent such mistakes?

"I have no experience with this particular form either," a voice in the back of her mind pointed out. *"And I'd appreciate it if you didn't injure my body while you are using it! I felt that, too!"* the youma added acidly.

"Sorry," Ami answered, brushing through her hair in embarrassment. The thick bristles felt like wet seaweed and had the same colour, but

nevertheless managed to stay in the shape of Ami's preferred hairstyle. Something else caught the teenager's attention. She had a tail! She threw a glance over her shoulder at the smooth, tapering appendage that curled upwards so she could see it better. None of the humanoid bodies she had borrowed before had sported a tail. She curled it around herself, catching the serpentine tip in her left hand and stroked it in wonder.

"Yes, yes, it's a tail. Not as good for striking as my original, if I may say so. Now can we get to the island already? I'm not enjoying this. Being unable to move reminds me of being stuck in Beryl's accursed crystal!"

If Mareki was trying to make Ami feel guilty, she was succeeding. "I don't intend to put you into danger," the blue-haired girl replied softly and took an experimental step forward. Immediately, she stumbled, taken off-guard by the changed proportions of her legs, and flailed her arms to maintain her balance. The instinctive and unaccounted-for counter-balancing of the tail foiled her efforts, and she tumbled forward.

"Watch those claws!" Cathy shouted, eyes going wide as she ducked out of reach of the grasping fingers seeking for a handhold.

"Sorry!" Ami's feet left the ground as she arrested her fall by floating, hanging diagonally in the air before tilting back into an upright position. Green blood shot to her cheeks as she lowered her head, embarrassed by her awkward movements. "Um, I think I'll settle for flying for now."

"Safer all around," the youma's voice agreed.

The smoothness of the transition from Ami's floating dungeon to a location just in sight of the Avatar Islands' shore was a pleasant surprise for the dabbling dark magic user. The youma body she was inhabiting had to be a lot better attuned to the energies that fuelled the teleport spell than her own. The competitive aspect of her personality, which drove her to excel in intellectual pursuits - which magic definitely fell under - felt irked by that observation and started

planning how to best remedy this perceived inadequacy. Ami blinked. What was she thinking? Not being as corrupted as the youma was a *good* thing! *So are more lessons with Jadeite,* a much less logical part of her brain commented. Scepticism radiated from the passenger in the back of her mind and informed her that Mareki had caught at least a glimpse of this train of thought, and Ami dropped it like a hot potato to survey her surroundings instead. She was hovering a few metres above the ocean, high enough that the spraying froth of the water couldn't reach the soles of her boots. From her position, she could see that the tides were not really red, they only reflected the colour of the clouds above, which covered the sky like a persistent, rolling explosion. She had expected the sulphurous and slightly sooty smell of the air, but the tropical temperatures took her by surprise. *The island isn't that far south, though?* she pondered idly, looking at the distant isle that protruded like a gigantic shark fin from the sea, and prepared for some serious investigation. First, she needed her equipment. "Mercury Power, Make Up!"

The soothing familiarity of the transformation washing over her reminded her of home for the brief moment it took the ribbons of water to coalesce around her curves and form her uniform, replacing the high-slitted green dress that Mareki had been wearing. Ami felt clean and refreshed, as if the magic could compress a bath, styling, and manicuring session into a timeless instant. With a slight smile, she looked down at herself to see how being a youma had affected her outfit. Most everything looked like she had come to expect, but there were some differences. She raised her right hand, inspecting the fingers. There were holes in the glove to let the long claws through, which was entirely practical. Putting aquamarine nail polish on them was not. Ami shook her head at the sight and twisted to look over her shoulder at her backside, which felt a bit draughtier than she was used to. The transformation magic had not handled the unexpected presence of a tail very intelligently. Yes, there was a hole for the appendage in the white fabric of her leotard, but her already short skirt rode up until it rested on the base of her tail bone and did nothing to cover her backside. "Hmm."

"Just remove it completely. We look ridiculous like this," the co-driver in Ami's mind suggested.

"Aren't you afraid that the leotard on its own would be too revealing?"

"Not by Dark Kingdom standards. If there's something to be embarrassed about, it's all those ribbons."

Filing that bit of information away, Ami gripped the hem of her pleated skirt left and right of her tail and tugged. With a ripping sound, the cloth tore apart vertically, allowing it to cascade down to the sides of the appendage. A brief incantation of the fabrication spell later, and the garment looked as if it had been designed with said gash. Satisfied with her appearance, Ami brushed a few seaweed-coloured tresses out of the way as she reached for her pointed right ear, fumbling for the earring that would activate her visor. As soon as she felt the transparent display slide over her eyes, she teleported again, disappearing into a vortex of greenish-tinged blue. She reappeared over the beach close to where she had located the footprint, surrounded by a whirl of droplets rather than her usual snowflakes. From here at the foot of the craggy mountain, it loomed like an ancient, withered pyramid that some giant had vented his rage on with an axe, leaving deep fissures and valleys that threatened to split the mass into distinct slices. Ami tilted her head back to see better, adjusting her visor to compensate for the glowing sky that made the rock appear black in comparison. Before she could start her search, however, the device beeped a warning, drawing a red contour around a speck of empty air a few metres off the coast, about a stone's throw away. Ami sucked in a sharp breath as she recognised the invisible creature that was inching closer as a ghost.

"Enemy?" Mareki asked, noticing their shared muscles tense.

Ami adjusted more settings, and identified a thin, immaterial line connecting the undead with the mainland. Her mouth half-opened in a snarl, displaying her fangs. *"Yes. One of Zarekos' ghosts. Dangerous if unnoticed, but fragile."*

"It's coming toward us," the youma cautioned. *"May I kill it?"*

Ami could feel the excited creature struggle for dominance of the body, and opted to give way for the moment. Releasing the spirits

bound to a tormented existence as ghosts was one of her reasons for taking over the Avatar Isles, and destroying the abominations was a simple way to achieve this. She furrowed her brow, her anger at Zarekos rekindled by the sight of what looked to be a young boy's transparent face, distorted into a perpetual hateful grimace. Hadn't the inhabitants of this place suffered enough in life already? Mareki burst into action. Ami's mouth opened wide, as if the lower jaw wasn't connected at all with the upper one, and she could feel a pressure build deep in the back of her throat. Hissing like a tea kettle, a blast of water shot forth, bursting into myriads of shiny droplets as it impacted the apparition's form and ripped into it, dispersing the ghost. On reflex, Ami seized back control of the body when she felt a burning sensation in her throat and mouth cavity, and pressed both hand on her lips, red eyes watering. *"OW! That hurt! Why did you do that?"* she complained mentally as the body doubled over in a coughing fit.

"It's not me, it's these changes you made to my body!" Mareki shifted the blame right back, her voice sounding not any more pleased than Ami's. *"My own attack isn't supposed to harm me!"*

"Okay," Ami conceded. *"However, I think it would be best if I handled the fighting myself from now on."* She straightened and let her gaze wander over the barren cliffs, making sure that no other spectres had taken the opportunity to sneak up on her while she was distracted. Her visor pointed out two more ghosts drifting like smoke around the twin peaks of the mountain, but they seemed content to watch from a distance and posed no immediate threat. Ami didn't feel any of the usual slight unease from being on a foreign Keeper's territory, but she thoroughly scanned the surrounding countryside anyway, just to be on the safe side. There was no reason to stick around in an area in which Zarekos could dump as many troops as he wanted straight on top of her. Sweeping her gaze over the barely existent vegetation and the sandy beach as she turned in a circle, she put the remains of that nagging worry to rest. There was no trace of a Keeper's influence here, and even the tendrils of corruption caressing the island from across the shallow sea seemed to have a hard time to take root in the dense stone. Reassured that she wasn't suddenly going to be drowned underneath a wave of animated dead bodies, the teenager focused

on the two ghosts she had spotted. The wretched spirits died within instants, never knowing what hit them.

"Whoa. How did you do *that, my Keeper?"* the foreign voice in her mind piped up, sounding amazed and terrified at the same time. If the youma had been in control of her body she would have been gaping.*"That's a scary power. Bam, giant water fist out of nowhere stomping them flat! What kind of spell is this? If I may ask?"* Mareki's last question sounded more cautious as she remembered whom she was talking to.

"It's not a proper spell," Ami explained, her crimson eyes alert as she kept simultaneously scanning the countryside and typing away at her palmtop, which she had retrieved after remotely smashing the opponents into bits. *"It is more of an indirect application of my Keeper powers, mixed in with some of the telekinesis that Jadeite has taught me. The interaction behind the different layers of magic is quite fascinating, really. You wouldn't happen to have a background in spellcrafting?"*

Mareki caught a flitting glimpse of Mercury's thought processes, perceiving an intricate diagram that was to an aspiring mage apprentice what a page-long differential equation was to a mediocre mathematics student. Needless to say, she felt very out of her depth. *"I get by on innate powers just fine."* More interesting was the way that Mercury's heartbeat had sped up when she had mentioned Jadeite's name. Romantic feelings for the blond general? That was important to know. Mareki made a mental note to steer very clear of that proverbial minefield when she schemed to improve her own status. *"What are these ghosts doing here?"*

"From their positioning, I calculate a seventy percent likelihood that they were spies, not guards," Ami answered, entering more commands. *"There weren't enough of them to form an effective combat force, and they remained invisible all of the time. Observers, not fighters."* she explained her reasoning as she drifted across the shore, closer to a narrow crevasse that had caught her attention. The diagonal gap in the flat rock was wide enough for a grown man to squeeze into sideways, easy allowing her slight frame inside.

"Why are we contorting to fit into this fissure?" Mareki asked,

concentrating on keeping their tail from getting squished against the wall. The Keeper constantly forgot about its existence.

"I haven't spotted our enigmatic survivor yet, but there's some kind of ward here somewhere, according to my sensors." Ami's claws brushed over the rock, scratching thin trails into the layer of soot before they caught on a near-invisible edge. With some effort, the possessed youma pried loose a thin stone plate that hid a narrow passage. On the cover's back, she found a many-pointed mark that was definitely artificial in nature.

"What does that do?"

"I'm not very familiar with warding magic, but I think it's supposed to prevent people from finding this secret door." Ami peered into the revealed tunnel entrance. Its interior shifted rapidly to grey tones as her visor compensated for the lack of light. She got the impression of a long, natural cave half-filled with water, with only the tops of a few stalagmites forming solid footholds directly underneath the surface. A long breath escaped her lips as she peered down at her computer screen for confirmation of what she was seeing. *"That's a lot of traps."*

"I don't sense anything," Mareki said, wishing she could understand the data presented by Mercury's devices better.

"They are mechanical in nature, not magical. Just look at these loose boulders in the ceiling, hooked up to wires camouflaged by the water. The lightest touch could bring them down on an intruder." With her index finger, she pointed at a natural pillar. *"Those little holes in it contain spring-fired darts. I wouldn't be surprised either if even the water level in the cavern could be raised remotely."*

"Whoever is living here doesn't like guests," Mareki concluded, somewhat superfluously.

Ami's lips curved upward in amusement. *"I think that's forgiveable, considering the neighbours. Shall we go introduce ourselves?"* Not waiting for an answer, she disappeared from her spot with a shimmer of distorted air. For someone who could float and teleport, a trap-filled corridor was not much of an obstacle. With a flash, the

blue-skirted youma appeared at the end of the tunnel, where a much more formidable barrier barred the passage. A thick, solid plate of smoothed rock, round like a millstone, blocked her path and, more importantly, her line of sight. While teleporting blind was theoretically possible, it was also suicidal. Avoiding contact with anything that looked as if it might set off a trap by hovering in the air, she inspected the ancient-looking network of lines and runes engraved painstakingly into the massive door. It didn't take Ami's visor to determine that the angular lines, which never crossed each other, formed a magical pattern. They were glowing in unsubtle ochre tones, after all.

Faced with this gate that appeared to have weathered the centuries and which impeded her progress, Ami did the polite thing. She raised her hand and knocked. "Hello? Is anyone here?"

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Strange Trolls

Originally on 2010-05-14T22:10:00

Ami rubbed her aching jaw, narrowing her eyes at the twisting patterns on the solid rock gate in surprise. When she had knocked at the door, she hadn't expected for it to knock back. While not any stronger than the rap of her knuckles, the unseen counter-attack would have pushed her off the top of the withered stairs leading out of the water and up to the rounded obstacle, had she not been flying. In silence, she hovered above the gurgling pool that shimmered green like unripe lemons in the ward's ochre light, listening to the last echoes of her call being swallowed by the darkness. Only the sound of the occasional droplets dripping from the ceiling kept her company as she strained her ears to hear whether there was any reaction from the other side of the door. At least she could pass time by scanning that arcane pattern etched into the surface of the magical door more in-depth while waiting to see if anyone would react to her greeting.

After several long and moments during which she found out just how loud her own breathing sounded in the absence of other sounds, a thin, pipe-like contraption popped out of a hole set into the door frame, surrounded by a cloud of old dust and pebbles that had clogged its tube. A flat mirror gleamed at the end, reflecting the dim light as it twisted and turned. A periscope, Ami realised, and stayed perfectly still until whoever was holding it had properly focused on her.

A voice, muffled by the metre thick rock between the waiting girl and the speaker, called out "Who are you? What do you want?"

"That sounded like a speaking pig," Mareki commented uncharitably.

Ami's expression remained unchanged. *"Trolls all sound a bit like that,"* she explained. Loud, she called "I am Sailor Mercury! I'm here to find out who is living on this island and if we can help each other!" Something bumped into the rock behind the door, and she could

hear a grunt before the periscope twitched slightly.

"She could be a vamp. Look at them fangs!" A new voice said loudly, but not loud enough that Ami could have interpreted the exclamation as meant for her.

"I'm not a vampire!" Ami shouted, awkwardly manoeuvring her tongue around the pointy teeth in question.

"That's what a vampire would say!" the voice shouted back.

"Look, I am floating right over a pool of water," Ami pointed out calmly. "Vampires can't do that."

"Lemme look! Lemme look! Ow! At least tell me what she looks like?" a third voice chimed in, speaking at a volume that indicated that the troll wasn't addressing the seaweed-haired visitor.

"Like some human got it on with a scrawny lizard and tried to drown the result in a bucket of white paint," the first speaker described magnanimously.

"Hey!" Mareki's offended mental voice rang through the teenage Keeper's skull, her ire hot like a bonfire.

"And she's wearing a really ugly dress," the creature added.

"Think she's edible?" the third voice asked, sounding hopeful.

By now, Ami could feel her right eyebrow twitch, which surprised her because there wasn't any reason to get irrationally angry. Emotional bleed-over from the youma? "I can *hear* you," she stated through clenched teeth.

"Yeah, but you can't get through the door if we don't let you, freak!" the troll taunted back, adding a farting noise to emphasize his point.

Ami lowered her eyelids and took a deep breath to calm herself down. Mareki shouting incoherently about skinning the worthless scum alive wasn't helping. "I do notice that you failed to describe my eyes," she said in an icy tone of voice, glowering up at the viewing device with a gaze that burned as bright as hellfire.

"What about them?" The periscope squeaked as it was adjusted from pointing at Ami's cleavage to her eyes. "Oh shit!"

There was a moment of silence as the trolls huddled together and debated among themselves, their whispers swallowed by the thick stone. "All right." It was the second voice, sounding much more respectful than before. "Please wait right here. Need to go ask the boss what to do. This is not something we can decide."

Flanked on both sides by four muscular trolls whose green hides were covered in battle scars and dragging massive war hammers behind them, Ami advanced through a corridor, floating a few centimetres in the air. She was not merely showing off, as the uneven ground with its deep cracks and missing tiles would have been treacherous even when well lit. The sputtering torch held by the foremost troll revealed only the closest of these hazards with its flickering light, all the while emitting a noxious smoke that prickled in Ami's noise. The slightly monstrous-looking girl took in her surroundings with interest, following the hunched-over shadows creeping over decaying murals with her gaze. This ruin looked as if it had been abandoned a long time before the creatures had made their home here.

"Can you tell me about this 'boss' we are going to see?" she asked, returning her attention to her wary escort. The trolls she had seen so far gave her the impression that they survived, rather than thrived. Empty flabs of skin where usually pot-bellies bulged were proof of hard times.

"Marda's the meanest troll you'll ever lay your eyes on, Keeper," one of the greenskins to her left answered, and the others nodded their big-nosed heads in unanimous agreement.

"She's strong, then?" Ami asked, not having expected the community's leader to be female.

"Strong? Ha!" the troll slapped his thighs in amusement. "'Strong' she asks." Hesitating suddenly, he scrunched up his face as he looked at Ami's figure. "Err, you are a lady outside of this minion too,

right?" At Ami's nod, he continued "Okay, just making sure. Anyway," his tone became louder and more enthusiastic, "strong and wily. Not even Zarekos' pet dragon messed with her!"

Ami's heart skipped a beat. "Zarekos has a dragon?" she asked in a small voice.

"Nah, the thing flew away when the old bat ran out of money. Wish I had wings," someone behind Ami said, pursing his lips into a nauseating pout. "She rallied us when everything went to hell and the bloodsuckers started trapping the portals and dragging everyone to their prisons for food."

"Oh yeah, remember when she nailed the count Beol to a tree? He never lived that down!"

"Should have seen her when that overgrown leech across the channel still kept trying to root us out every week or so," another troll laughed. "Nobody can take a skeleton's skull off with a single swing and have it fly as far as she did!"

"And she's smoking hot, too!" One of the trolls in the back, who had the large, protruding brow of a Neanderthal, guffawed.

The troll walking right in front of him lifted his leg and kicked backward, hitting the speaker in the shin. "Shush. She'll kick your arse if she hears you!" he blurted out, black eyes darting left and right as if he was expecting someone to attack from the shadows any moment now. "You know how she gets." All the other trolls grimaced, holding their legs, arms or fingers in remembered pain.

"Yeah, don't need no more mangled bones for the- Ow!" The troll who had praised their leader's appearance furrowed his brow as he glared at the warrior walking in front of him, having been kicked again, harder. He bared his crooked teeth in anger, but the creature to his left shot him a dark look and shook his head, silently indicating Ami by looking at her from the corner of his eyes. The offended troll's mouth closed with an audible snap, but he continued glowering unhappily at the guard who had hurt him.

While Ami still tried to make sense of the byplay, her guards abruptly

changed direction when the group reached a junction in the corridor, and she nearly bumped into them. They were taking her deeper into the ruin, bypassing a side passage whose unfinished stone walls looked as if they had only been recently hewn out of the mountain. As the trip through the winding passages continued, she noticed that dust covered earlier tracks, indicating that these tunnels were unused most of the time.

"I wouldn't show a stranger important areas of my fortress either," Mareki chimed in, having been content to remain silent for a while.

The corridor opened into a larger, circular hall, filled with more trolls that lurked in the shadows along its walls. The cold steel of unsheathed weapons gleamed here and there in the candlelight as the creatures shifted when the group entered. In the centre of the chamber stood a tall rock that had been hollowed out to form a crude throne, occupied by a muscular greenskin who looked different from any that Ami had met so far. She was wearing a full suit of armour, for one, and the intense stare of her coal-like eyes seemed more alert and calculating than anything Ami had come to expect from this species. The lizard-tailed girl's escorts filed into the crowd, while the troll ruler gestured imperiously, motioning to her to come closer. "Keeper Sailor Mercury. I am Marda, the leader of this tribe."

Various warning lights flared up behind the transparent surface of Ami's visors, the most alarming of which was the seizable amount of black powder secreted away just underneath the tiles where visitors would be expected to stand. The girl hesitated at the sight and gave the trapped area a wide berth, ending up close to the crowd to the right side of the room, rather standing directly in front of the throne. Its occupant kept watching her movements in silence, and Ami got the impression that those piercing black eyes were judging her. She hoped that the verdict was positive, but Marda's features remained unreadable.

Unsure of how to address the trolls' ruler and feeling all eyes in the room on herself, Ami shuffled her feet and settled on a polite and generic title. "Lady-" she began, only to be interrupted immediately as a frown appeared on the troll's face.

"Lord," Marda corrected, and added "I am male," upon noticing her guest's puzzled expression. The troll's irritation grew as Ami kept looking incredulously at the two prominent bumps bulging underneath the creature's chain mail shirt. "Ignore the body. It is merely the result of a very juvenile curse," the creature said, gritting her teeth. "Mukrezar, may the dark gods feast on his entrails for all eternity, found it so amusing that he made it permanent."

Ami stared. "Oh. That must me awkward. Um, he was the Keeper who originally conquered the Avatar Islands, right? I thought he was dead. Shouldn't his magic have faded away?"

"Yes, the bastard is dead, and good riddance!" A glob of spit splashed onto the floor. "Zarekos grabbed some of his dungeon hearts in the free-for-all when his money ran out. As long as they still exist, my curse persists," Marda said sourly. "But enough of me. What brings a Keeper out here to our modest, portal-less abode?"

Thrown of balance by the sudden topic change Ami blinked once. Being the centre of attention didn't help her eloquence any. "Um, I wanted to know who was living here. That is, I want to conquer the Avatar Islands, and my minions spotted traces of inhabitation in this supposedly dead place while looking for a good landing point, so I came to investigate."

"Conquer the Avatar Islands?" Marda raised an eyebrow, ignoring the excited chatter triggered by the Keeper's statement. "As much as I would enjoy seeing Zarekos crushed into the dirt, the burning question here is: *why*? Any riches are long gone, and there aren't even potential victims left."

"Oh, I am independently wealthy," Ami waved off that concern. "I'm looking for knowledge and vast, empty territory for my experiments, among other things," she explained. With a smile that was made less reassuring by her fangs, she added "I really think we can help each other here. Your living conditions aren't all that great," this was a reasonable guess, as most of the trolls she had seen looked undernourished, "and I could feed and pay you. In turn, you must have ample experience fighting Zarekos' undead hordes - just what I need! And of course, defeating him would free you from your curse."

The background chatter increased in intensity at the prospect of food and gold and the warriors were whistling among each other in excitement.

"QUIET!" Marda slipped out of her elevated seat, armour rattling in the sudden silence as she stepped toward Ami. Despite the youma body being taller than her normal form and floating a hand's breadth above the floor, the large-nosed creature did not have to look up to meet the teenage Keeper's eyes. The gleaming war hammer dangling from her belt clinked against her legs as she circled her visitor like a vulture. "And do you have enough troops for such an undertaking? Despite his empty treasury, the bloodsucker still commands an impressive amount of vampires, along with vast hordes of ghosts and skeletons."

"I'm aware of that and working on a solution," Ami admitted hesitantly, shuddering as she remembered her painful loss against the self-styled emperor. "Actually, I'm surprised he didn't manage to claim this island too," she said, spreading her arms to indicate her surroundings.

Marda's lips split into a malicious grin that revealed surprisingly even teeth. "Who said he didn't?" she said, savouring every word. "We kicked him out. Dungeon hearts make such soothing noises when they shatter, don't you agree?"

"Is she threatening us?" Mareki asked as Mercury felt the urge to back away from the troll invading her space.

"Err, yes," Ami agreed, drifting a step away from the troll ruler, "the defeat of an enemy tends to lift one's spirits." In the privacy of her mind, she answered *"I think it's more intended as a warning."*

"Your offer is intriguing, of course. However, I'm not convinced that you have what it takes to assault his holdings. We didn't survive the chaos after Mukrezar's fall just to end up as cannon fodder!" Marda continued walking around the possessed youma and inspecting her from all sides.

"I don't treat my employees as expendable," Ami said quickly.

"Oh? Have you won many battles with that attitude yet?" Marda quipped, her cheerful tone of voice indicating that she wasn't believing a word.

"I should probably amend that to 'I don't treat my employees who aren't mindless magical constructs as expendable'. I have destroyed other Keepers though, the most prominent of which was Keeper Malleus."

"Malleus. Hmm." Marda's right hand rose to her chin in a reflexive gesture as she thought, but stopped before the cold metal gauntlet could touch the skin. "I've heard of him, vaguely. He was around for a long time." Turning her back on Ami, she addressed the assembled warriors. "What do you think about her offer?"

The creatures whooped enthusiastically and banged their weapons against each other. "Hell yes! Working for a real Keeper again!" "Never liked farming anyway!" "As long as she's got money."

"Very well. I, too, am tired of mere day to day survival. I want revenge and see Zarekos and his brood crushed and rendered into dust! We shall assist you."

"That's gr-" Ami's budding smile froze as the troll raised her hand in a shushing motion.

"On several conditions."

Judging by the faint grumbling from the shadows, Ami estimated that Marda's proclamation had taken her subjects as much by surprise as herself. She closed her mouth and cocked her head, intrigued that the troll would dare ask concessions from a Keeper. Either she was a very good judge of character, or she simply didn't care about the possible consequences. "Name them."

"First, my men remain under my direct command. I will not have them separated or have them take orders from someone else."

"Provided that you still take your orders from me, that's acceptable," Ami agreed. She would have to delegate power at some point anyway. Jadeite probably wouldn't like it, though.

"Second, I will be actively involved in crafting the battle plans. If I don't like them, my men won't fight."

Ami grimaced. That condition could prove problematic. "Um, while I tend to listen to my advisers I'm not in the habit of granting them outright veto powers. Besides, how would I know that your strategic abilities are up to par?"

Marda bared her teeth and tapped ami on her collarbone with one finger, bringing her face so close that the troll's foul breath hit her like a physical blow. "Excuse me? When was the last time you led a rag-tag band of survivors through undead-infested Keeper territory, successfully smashed his dungeon heart, and established and held a fortress in enemy territory? Well? Yeah, didn't think so."

Ami stumbled back, eyes widened at the repeated invasion of her personal space, and blinked rapidly. "Point taken." Put that way, a plan that the woman disapproved of was likely to be a bad plan in the first place.

"And third, you will not use this island as a foothold for your invasion. In fact, you will not create a dungeon heart here at all."

Now this, Ami found unreasonable. "But from what you have told me, Zarekos will never be able to return here! It would be the best location! Why?"

"These are my conditions. That is the only offer you will get, Keeper. Take it or leave it." Marda didn't bother to explain her reasons, standing with her arms crossed and ignoring both Ami's frown and the muttering of her troops.

Ami could hear the unshakeable resolve in the troll leaders' voice. "I-all right." It was a concession that Ami didn't like, but any help was better than no help at all. These creatures knew the lay of the land and had experience fighting her enemy.

"You will, of course, be providing supplies and equipment," Marda stated, making it sound like an order, rather than a question.

"That sounds reasonable, given your current resources. I will need

about a fortnight to get ready for my invasion, so you have time to prepare," Ami said, suppressing the need to squirm underneath the creature's stare. Something about the troll's powerful presence set her on edge, but her visor couldn't make out anything really strange about her. Not even the curse - if it existed - showed up as anything but background noise.

"Good, we are agreed then." The headstrong troll held out her hand, palm facing upward, and Ami realised that she was waiting for her first payment that would seal the deal. Producing a tiny sapphire from thin air, Ami held it between thumb and index finger, ignoring the awed whispers as its facets broke the light.

"However," the hovering youma stopped just before the gem could reach the troll's hand, "I am rather interested how you expect to hold me to my end of the deal, once you are mine. You probably aren't just going to take my word for it?"

With a lightning-quick motion, the armoured creature snatched the gem from the girl's fingers before she could react. Wage received, her dungeon heart forged the connection, recognising Marda as Ami's newest minion. "That's simple. Let me demonstrate."

Ami reeled as an indomitable will raced down the freshly-forged connection between her and her new minion, slamming into her own like a wrecking ball made of tightly-controlled and suppressed anger and determination. The invisible tether linking the troll to Ami's dungeon heart seemed to hum, strained to its limit. The tiniest bit more power and it would snap.

"We will just leave," the female troll grinned maniacally.

"R-right." Legs wobbly from the intensity of what she had felt during the brief contact with the troll's mind, Ami pulled her still outstretched arm away as if burnt.

Mareki accurately summarised the young Keeper's racing thoughts. *"That creature has* issues*."*

Once Keeper Mercury had left, the newly-hired trolls remained in the room, looking to their ruler and waiting for a sign.

"All right. Her attention is no longer on us." Tension seemed to leave the attendants at their leader's announcement.

A heavily-built warrior stepped forward. "That was unwise, Lord Marda. What if she had just left instead of accepting your conditions? Then we'd still be stuck here!"

The armoured greenskin spun on her heel to spear the speaker with a glare. "You are a fool, Toreb. They were necessary. How long do you think it would take her to find out if she had free reign of this place? And how do you think she would react to our little secret?"

Toreb's skin turned a sickly light-green as he paled. "You are right, my Lord. Of course. I apologise."

"What do we do *if* she finds out?" someone else called from the crowd.

"At that point, we should have access to some portals if she is too strong. If not..." Marda's face split into a grin that wouldn't have looked out-of-place on the Reaper's.

Lab Visit

Originally on 2010-05-21T00:25:00

"You appear young, for a Keeper," Marda commented, looking down on the black-dressed girl's blue hair as she walked alongside her. Ami had to take two steps for each of the larger troll's long strides to keep up, and their combined footsteps echoed through the glittering ice corridors of Ami's dungeon. Loud clangs of metal weapons banging against each other or into the unmoving wood of training targets sounded from their destination.

Ami suppressed an amused smile as she remembered the wide-eyed expression on the troll woman's face when she first saw the Keeper's true form, momentarily shaking her unflappable façade. "It's a long and strange story. I'll tell you some other time. You wanted to see my troops first, right?" The double-winged door barring her way swung open as if on its own volition, and a wave of hot, sweat-smelling air washed over the two figures standing in front of it.

The doorway before them opened into a wide cavern, lit by electrical light bulbs in the ceiling whose glass had been twisted into irregular shapes by corruption patterns. Their dimmed brilliance cast a network of light and shadows over the room that reminded Ami of sunlight falling through a forest canopy, especially in combination with the rows of wooden training dummies that stood vertically like tree trunks. Goblins with big, triangular ears stabbed and swiped at the moving targets dangling from the turning contractions with their scythes, producing clinks when they missed and struck the dangling chains instead.

Marda blinked as if she couldn't quite believe what she was seeing. "Goblins. You are trying to assault the Avatar Islands with goblins."

Her voice attracted the attention of the loincloth-wearing minions, whose few pieces of armour consisted of large, spiked pauldrons and metal greaves protecting their shins. Heads turned toward the

doorway as their owners momentarily forgot their creaking sparring partners. One of the short minions suffered for his momentary lapse in attention when a horizontal arm of his training dummy swung back and slammed into the side of his head, sending him sprawling to the floor among the snickers of his peers.

The troll let out a long breath, swallowing a much more caustic remark before reformulating her verdict. "Keeper, even if you use a horned reaper's standard equipment as their uniform, I seriously doubt that they will be much use in battle. Worse, even. Scythes. *Really?*."

"She calling us weak?" "Yes, I think she calling us weak!" Goblins weren't the brightest creatures around, but they were not deaf. Many of them bared their teeth at Marda and glowered at her. "We fight you! Show you who the wimpy one!"

"Poor threat assessment abilities, too. Please tell me you have some *real* troops elsewhere." A vein above the troll's right eyebrow was twitching as she turned toward the blue-haired girl, ignoring the posturing goblins as if they weren't worth her attention.

"Well, there's Mareki, and I hope to employ more of her kind soon, and I also have many warlocks working for me. Besides, the goblins-" Ami started to explain.

"Are useless! You could at least give them proper weapons." The burly troll waved her outstretched hand in the direction of the training soldiers, waving it as if she was trying to shake some dirt off.

"Keeper, we can hit stupid troll now, yes?" the most angry-looking of the goblins interrupted, while more congregated around him, nodding.

"No, don't fight," Ami said sourly, her patience sorely tested by her companion's lack of tact.

"What is going on here?" A blonde figure towering over the green crowd pushed through the throng of scythe wielding goblins, shoving those out of her way that didn't clear a path fast enough. Her face lit up with a smile when she spotted Ami's blue hair in the doorway.

"Oh, hello Mercury. Who's that?"

"Cathy, that's Marda, the leader of the trolls I hired. Marda, this is Cathy, my combat instructor."

"A human?" The chainmail-wearing troll looked the scar-faced blonde up and down, her gaze lingering on the very short blue skirt for a moment. Her face became even more chagrined as she recognised the outfit as the same that possessed Mareki had worn. "That had better not be your uniform for the female staff, Keeper! "

"This?" Cathy tugged at the seams answered, and a mischievous grin parted her lips. "I'll have you know that Mercury is very fond of them. You'll probably end up wearing one too sooner or later!" she teased.

"Out of the question. It looks more like something suited for dancing on a table in a cheap tavern than like suitable garb for teaching. Although," the troll hesitated and let her gaze wander over the gathered warriors theatrically, "from what I have seen, they would have benefited more from a table dance than from your instruction."

The blonde looked through half-lidded eyes down at the green creature who had just insulted her abilities, the skills of her troops, and Mercury's fashion sense in one fell swoop. "Great, we have a comedian. You really know how to pick them, Mercury."

Ami nodded. "That's a bit harsh, Marda," she said in a reproachful tone of voice.

"It's the truth. She sucks, and so do your troops," the large-nosed creature said unapologetically, meeting the glares of the growling and glowering crowd with no outward sign of feeling intimidated.

Ami was starting to seriously reconsider the value of hiring the troll leader. "Marda. They have all proven their usefulness to me already - which is more than I can say for you, so please stop insulting them."

"I am merely expressing my disappointment with the lack of combat-readiness of your forces." The troll's nasty grin revealed her teeth.

"But if you want to test my skills, I could beat up this roomful of rabble for you. No problem." The boast did nothing to endear the troll to the goblins, and their grumbling redoubled.

"Could you all just-"

"All right!" Cathy interrupted Mercury's attempt to calm everyone down, matching Marda's sneer with an equally malicious one. "Let's got to the ring over there and see whether you can put your money where your mouth is!"

In the blink of an eye, the sand-filled square area delimited by ropes was surrounded by a rowdy mass of half-naked goblins who cheered and jostled each other. Ami kept in the back, well away from the bobbing scythes, fearing for her limbs. "Cathy, I don't think that beating each other up over-"

"Don't worry, I haven't had an exciting fight for a while. This should be fun. I'll make sure not to do anything permanent to her," the blonde said, pointing with her thumb at the chainmail-wearing troll.

"Likewise," Marda said, already walking through the crowd and climbing into the ring. The war hammer usually dangling from her belt rested loosely on her shoulder as she settled into a relaxed stance and waited for her opponent to draw her sword.

"Ready?" Cathy's eyes narrowed as she took a quick step forward, aiming a probing stab at the troll's chest to test her skill. With a quiet shing noise, the chainmail rippled as its wearer swivelled on her heel, manoeuvring out of the path of the blow. A slight shift in weight, and the creature was leaning toward Cathy. *"Her left arm!"* the woman thought as an open-handed blow blurred toward the elbow of her sword arm. Drawing on the speed granted by the enchantments that Mercury had bestowed on her, she managed to withdraw the limb before the lightning-quick attack could break her joint. Instead, the armoured gauntlet shrieked over the withdrawing sword's metal surface, knocking the weapon off balance. Marda's brow furrowed at the sudden quickening of her opponent's movements, and her dispassionate expression turned into a scowl. She dashed forward, bringing her gleaming hammer around in a diagonal swing.

"She's nearly as fast as I am!" Cathy's blonde hair waved as she ducked, momentarily obscuring her view of her opponent's weapon even as she brought up her blade to block the strike. The weapon rang like a bell as the heavier hammer smashed into it, and was given no time to fall silent as parries and counter-attacks were exchanged in rapid succession. Cathy's eyes widened suddenly when a heavy weight stomped down on her right foot, pinning it in place just when her latest dodge required her to move it. *"Oh cra-"*

With a loud crack, the troll's left elbow smashed into the blonde's face, dislodging a spray of sweat as her head jerked backwards.

"Cathy!" Ami' shouted in fright, and the blonde disappeared from the ring, reappearing in front of the blue-haired girl, who stumbled from catching the larger woman in her arms. "That's enough!"

"Ow," the female warrior said, lifting her free hand to her face and touching her nose experimentally. She winced and crossed her eyes to look at the red blood now coating her fingers. "I think it's broken."

"Please hold still for a moment," Ami asked as she wrapped her right hand in the green glow of her healing spell. Around the ring, the goblins were pouting and muttering in disappointment, both at the quick end of the fight and at Marda's victory.

The armour-clad troll was not even breathing hard. "Hmmph. Just your average mercenary in skill. Above militia, below trained knights. Nothing to get excited about, except for the unusual strength and speed. She's not a vampire, is she?"

Startled, Ami pulled her glowing fingers back when Cathy turned her head to roll her eyes at the troll. "Yeah, clearly I'm a bloodsucker. Notice how I have a heartbeat, no fangs, and my injuries don't heal on their own. The signs are unmistakable!"

"Well, you move like one," Marda muttered, crossing her arms. "Not a very powerful one of course, and you lack their reflexes, but still faster than a regular human could do without casting any spells."

"Her enchantments remain always active," Ami offered as explanation, taking the opportunity to patch up Cathy's nose before

the blonde got tired of glaring at Marda.

"In any case, her instructions are pathetic. She's teaching them moves that would only be effective if they had similar physical abilities to her own."

"On my orders," Ami clarified as she wiped her blood-stained fingers on a towel she had summoned from elsewhere in the dungeon. "You didn't let me finish when I tried to explain to you what I was planning for the goblins. Actually, I think it's easier if I just show you."

Ami hadn't intend for her laboratory to look like a mad scientist's lab, but somehow, that was exactly what the spacious hall ended up like. Some clutter was unavoidable when she was working on several different projects at once, especially when their completion was dependent on the outcome of her warlock's research. Still, she prided herself on at least keeping her workroom tidy. Her precious books were neatly stashed away in their dedicated shelves taking up an entire corner of the room, all the tools were hanging from their places on the walls, and even the glowing balls of life energy trapped in a church organ-like line-up of test tubes were all properly labelled and arranged in alphabetical order. Her guests were looking suitably impressed by their surroundings, at least. Especially the lightning crackling between the coils of her transformator in the back of the room drew a few awed glances as its stroboscobic light briefly cast the strange silhouettes lurking within the darkness into stark relief. Marda and Cathy shuffled closer to each other, their bodies tense as their gaze as they took in the strange sights and noises. Ami sympathised with the feeling. To be completely honest, the room tended to make her uneasy too, despite her being able to see in the dark. Only a few islands of light stood out in the surrounding twilight, illuminated by spotlights in the ceiling aimed at the places where she usually worked. This wasn't her preferred room configuration, but it kept the corruption from forcing her to constantly change light bulbs. She *would* find out how this obstinate effect worked and deal with it, though. Oh yes, she would.

"Ack! Something brushed against my hair!" Cathy yelped, batting at the air above her head as wings fluttered overhead.

"Oh, sorry." Ami put her hand in front of her mouth. "I think the bats got out again."

"What do you need bats for?"

"Well, I'm trying to train them to - DON'T TOUCH THAT!"

Marda, standing in one of the lighted circles, stood hunched over cylindrical glass tube that contained a chaotic swirl of reds and blues, and suddenly felt herself jerked backwards before her hand could make contact.

"Please don't touch anything that I haven't declared safe. Especially not the trap components." Ami said quickly, letting out a relieved breath.

"That thing's dangerous?" Cathy raised an eyebrow at the innocent-looking device lying on the table.

"Not as such, but if it breaks - well, you probably remember what happened to Boris."

Cathy gulped and gave the tube a wide berth.

"Anyway, I brought you here because of this," Ami said, hoping to forestall further potential accidents by keeping the demonstration here short. Her open palm pointed at a low gurney-like slab of stone covered with a white cloth that hung over its edge. Her visitors approached, stepping into the light and looking down at the huge, vaguely human-shaped lump hidden underneath the linen.

"Dabbling with necromancy, Keeper?" Marda asked, a note of distaste swinging in her voice.

"Only for healing," Ami muttered as she gripped one end of the cloth and pulled, revealing the gleaming form resting underneath. "This has never been alive in the first place."

"Hey, I think I recognise that thing. Isn't that the Reaper doll? It looks as if it didn't know when to stop dieting," Cathy said as

Ami smiled and rapped her knuckles against the construct's metallic

chest that looked as if had been modelled to look like a starvation victim, with the ribcage showing through the skin. "This is actually a new prototype. It's much more compact than the original, as I won't need to cram as many batteries inside once the warlocks solve a few more technical problems."

"Doesn't it need a head?" Marda asked, scratching her chin. "I'm not entirely sure how this relates to your goblins. It is much too big for a suit of armour, even if it follows their general body plan."

"Ah, that's what this is for!" Ami said, suddenly in a different spot of the room as she raised a circlet wrought from shimmering metal into the light and put it on her head, ruining her hairstyle in the process. In the blink of an eye, she was gone, re-appearing within another spotlight, where she put her hand on a lever protruding from the wall. "Please step back from the automaton, there may be side effects." Waiting until the two other females had heeded her warning, she jerked down the lever. "You know, this would be much more fun if I shouted IT'S ALIVE and laughed maniacally," she stated with a giggle, which earned her odd looks from the visitors to her lab. She jumped into the air and remained floating there, taking a lying position matching that of the inert automaton. When she sat up, the headless metal body on the slab mimicked her action, accompanied by the shriek of poorly-oiled joints.

"Impressive." Marda walked around the construct, which was content to remain in its seating position and let itself be inspected. "You want to give these replacement bodies to your warriors, and therefore, you are training them in techniques that will work with their new size and strength. However, how do you intend to power that many golems? Unless..." Her eyes wandered to the thick, spark-spitting cable emerging from the floor and going into the automaton's back.

"It's not really a golem, it's more like a remote-controlled artificial skeleton," Ami explained. "And the extension cord won't be needed for the production model. I'm still waiting for my researchers to develop a working gold-to-magic adapter, rather than the electricity-to-magic adapter this model is using."

"That's good. I don't think it would be a viable weapon with such an

obvious weak point like a cord," Cathy said. "Just how strong will this thing be?"

"Less powerful than my personal armour in order to keep operation costs down. Besides, I don't expect the goblins' reflexes would be quick enough to handle full speed." Ami was still hovering in her air and folded her arms together, a gesture that her creation aped without delay.

"Operation costs? What exactly are we talking about here?" Marda asked as she thought about the logistical implications.

"A rod of gold about as long as my foot and as thick as my thumb for six hours of continuous operation, as an early estimate." Ami said after teleporting her notes over from her dashboard and consulting them.

The troll made a choking noise and paled until her skin was a light green colour. "That's..." She held her hands apart the indicated distance, looking at it and then back at Ami in disbelief. "That's..." She covered her eyes with her palm and shook her head. "Keeper, we really, really need to discuss logistics and long-term planning!"

Last edited: Sep 9, 2016

Strategy?

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Sitting at the round table of her planning room with her companions, Ami was giving an account of her past battles to Marda, illustrating the high points by projecting recordings taken with her computer onto the room's back wall with the help of a crystal ball. She had to smile at the green creature's expression of childlike wonder when she realised at least part of the capabilities of the Mercury computer. *She seems to grasp its usefulness much faster than Cathy, Jered, and Snyder did.* However, to Ami's chagrin, the troll's face became longer and longer the more she heard about the girl's exploits.

"Keeper, if you wanted to raise my confidence in your ability to wage a proper war, then you have failed." Marda was resting her elbows on the wooden table and covering her face with her palms. "You tend to act like a hero, not a Keeper with minions at her disposal," the troll drawled. "Your victories so far? Using your personal power to lead from the front and hit enemies with some trick they were not prepared for."

"Hey! What's so bad about her keeping her underlings away from danger? She has always come through in the end!" Cathy came to the blue-haired girl's defence, slamming her fist on the table.

"Oh? And what would you call her first go at Zarekos, then? Testing the waters? A little setback?" The armour-wearing troll stared coldly into the blonde's eyes, while Ami looked at the floor at the reminder of her painful failure. "The only silver lining there is that it is an object lesson in what happens when she can't engage on her own terms, at a time of her own choosing, and with her usual tactics," Marda underlined each point by rapping her knuckles on the table, "utter, unmitigated disaster!"

"I'd call that more of an intelligence-gathering failure," Jered interrupted the greenskin's tirade. "If she had known more about the supernatural abilities and limitations of the vampires, they wouldn't

have made it to the dungeon heart at all." The weasel-featured man's voice lacked any friendliness, but Ami suspected that this had less to do with the troll's criticism and more with the fact that she had beaten up his girlfriend.

"That doesn't matter!" Marda declared loudly. "It's indicative of short-sighted planning." Turning to meet Ami's faintly-glowing eyes, she continued "You tend to think on a tactical level, rather than a strategic one. You are a skirmisher and your inexperience running a proper war effort for any prolonged amount of time is probably going to get us all killed!"

"Don't you think you are being a bit harsh in your assessment? She hasn't used larger forces yet because it was not necessary!" Unexpected, but not unwelcome, support came from Jadeite, whose expression had darkened more and more while he had been sitting beside the troll.

"Oh, you are a good one to judge, 'general'. When was the last time you have led an army to victory? Well? I'm waiting." Exaggeratedly tapping her foot, which took some effort to be audible on the thick carpet, the troll grinned at the curly-haired blond with contempt.

The dark general's narrow eyes gleamed cold like ice as he balled his fists. "Why you-"

"Jadeite, don't." While Ami's voice sounded tired, her cheeks coloured a bit in secret pleasure at Jadeite coming to her defence. "Marda is right. While her-"

"His," Marda corrected, furrowing her brows.

"-while *his* style of criticism is very direct, he raises valid points. However," Ami's red-glowing eyes bored into Marda's, "not everyone here has my patience. Please try to take their feelings into account when you formulate your thoughts, Marda."

"Is that an order?" the troll challenged.

Ami hesitated for a moment, and then her lips turned into a thin, determined line as she nodded. "Yes. No more unnecessary

provocations."

"Hm." Marda crossed her arms and turned away, pouting. Her gaze brushed over Snyder, who was sitting at Ami's left and nervously smoothing his bowl cut, hoping that the unfriendly and dangerous troll would continue treating him as if he didn't exist. The acolyte got the feeling that Mercury's newest addition to the team didn't like him very much, as she hadn't deigned to say a single word to him, not even a greeting.

"Very well. Let's talk about logistics instead. Given the capabilities of a dungeon heart, the most important question are your finances. How much gold exactly do you have in your treasury to even think you could operate your automatons at the predicted cost?" Marda's tone became more business-like, and she tugged the piece of paper and ink-tipped quill in front of her closer.

"I have a fairly steady income that is not linked to natural resources, but I am not willing to divulge the source." Ami answered. She wasn't about to share that she could just make gems and convert them to gold in her treasury. Not only would she never hear the end of pay raise demands, she also didn't know if changing gold prices would affect the dungeon heart or not. Magic seemed to have a bit of a mind of its own, so it wasn't impossible, even if it made no logical sense. But neither did a corruption effect that made the plants in images wither when nobody was looking. Let Marda think that the source of the wealth was some trading operation in another part of the world. "Daily income varies, but at the current rate, if I spend no gold on anything else, it would be enough to operate around five to ten of my creations."

Marda's eyebrows rose. "That's quite a lucrative source, whatever it is, Keeper. How odd that your dungeon does not reflect your affluence. I think I even saw a few rats flit about. Oh well." She shrugged her shoulders. "Given that we will have time to build reserves before each battle, that should be enough gold. Are you sure your supply can't suddenly be cut off?"

"Very." Ami confirmed.

"I'll take your word for it. Now then, we will have to get you used to

thinking strategically. Fortunately, I do have something that should help with that." Marda's armour clanked as she reached under the table and retrieved a leather bag, tied shut with a string. It rattled when it hit the table's surface, and Ami leaned forward in wonder.

Her eyes widened in surprise at the unexpected sight. "A board game?"

"It's called Kingdoms," Jered said, recognizing the small figures carved like castles, monsters, and soldiers that Marda pulled out of her bag. "It's a game of the nobility and also played in some taverns. I was never very good at it."

"No way to cheat, eh?" Marda asked, grinning like the cat that ate the canary as she positioned the pieces. "Now, winning requires careful long-term planning from the start, as well as some tactical skill. Let me explain the rules..."

Rows of goblins sat at the long tables of Ami's dining hall, chattering and snarling at each other when their elbows collided. The loud clatter of cutlery against tableware permeated the room, and so did the smell of fresh vegetable soup. In stark contrast to the loud and messy creatures, the trolls from the Avatar islands spooned out their bowls with great haste, quietly, and without spilling a drop. Stacks of clean-licked dishes piled up next to them, and still they kept asking for more.

"Boss? You look kind of down." One of the hunchbacked creatures sitting opposite of Marda commented. "Was the Keeper that disappointing?"

Marda muttered something into her bowl, not looking up.

"Sorry Boss, I didn't get that?"

"I said there is no way she never played that game before," Marda hissed, glowering at the underling pestering her, who completely failed to get the hint.

"So she won a game?"

"Five. In a row. Without losing once," a cheerful new voice intruded.

Marda's spoon bent under her grip as she gritted her teeth and looked up. "What are *you* doing here? Shouldn't you be eating with the Keeper?"

"More food for the kitchen." Cathy grinned, pointing her thumb over her shoulder at the wooden cart behind her, filled to the brim with various farm products and pushed by a team of four goblins. "You wouldn't believe how little of it would actually make it there if I didn't keep an eye on it." Her sheathed sword smacked down on a hand sneaking behind her back toward a large salt water fish, and it hastily withdrew as the struck goblin let out a wail. Others, who had been eyeing the cargo greedily too, pulled back, clearly impressed by the blonde's ability to sense what was going on behind her. They would have been disappointed to learn that she was merely watching their reflections in one of the water glasses.

"Bah. I maintain that she can't have been a beginner. She just tried to lure me into a false sense of security." Marda seemed unwilling to let the point go.

"You keep thinking that, then. Doesn't change the fact that she's still better at this than you." Cathy was very much enjoying seeing the armoured troll sulk. "Hey, at least you'll be reassured by the knowledge that she has this strategy thing down pat."

"There is a huge difference between winning at a game with clearly defined rules and winning a war," Marda snarled. "I was trying to teach her the basics. As she already knew them, this was nothing but a waste of time!"

"Whatever. You are just a sore loser." Cathy turned to leave, but the sudden weight of the troll's gauntlet on her right shoulder stopped her.

"Wait. There's something I want to know. How comes the Keeper is using goblins for so many menial tasks? Why isn't she using imps? Come to think of it, I haven't seen a single one around yet."

The cheerfulness left Cathy's blue eyes as she brushed the hand

away. "It's a precaution. She isn't on the best terms with some of the dark gods right now, and therefore she's playing it safe."

Marda followed the blonde's retreating back until the kitchen doors swallowed her and the rumbling cart. "Hmm. There's got to be more to it than that. I don't like it."

"She's got food, and a lot of it, and no vampires. Good enough for me," one of her underlings mumbled with a full mouth, earning himself a glare from his leader.

"Yeah, anything's better than that island," another troll agreed, leaning closer to Marda. He didn't go so far as risking his hand by patting the female troll on the back reassuringly, but his tone was cheerful. "You worry too much, Boss. One of the warlocks told me that this place has a temple, so she can't be on bad terms with all of the Dark Ones. We'll be fine!"

Marda continued glowering into her soup, large brows furrowing deeper.

Seven carved dragon heads decorated the vast chamber, disgorging tamed, clear waterfalls from their open maws. Three identical pairs faced each other from opposite sides of the room, while the seventh, largest statue loomed high up in the back wall and twinkled down at the bottom with eyes that were fist-sized rubies. As if competing with their brilliance, the water running down the gold-panelled walls glittered like diamonds where it splashed onto balconies set in its path and disgorged a fine mist into the perfumed air, causing rainbows to appear around the bright lighting crystals suspended from the ceiling. Dominating the opulent place, however, was a huge mountain of purple silk pillows, piled so high that three men standing on the shoulders of each other would not be able to reach its top, and spilling outward so that barely any of the expensive carpets were still visible. In a depression at the top of the mound throned the ruler of this place - as much as one could throne when one was lying half-sunken in this softness and smoking intoxicating incenses from a silver pipe. Surprisingly, it wasn't the man's belly that bulged grossly outwards, but the huge muscles lining his arms and legs,

cast into stark relief by the light of the two crystal balls floating above him.

Ignoring the moans and smacks from below, as well as the associated curvy bodies writhing around on several of the lower levels of his pillow pile, the man snapped his fingers, causing the dimmer of the two spheres to light up. A voice, distorted and tinny, piped up from the object. "Who dares - dammit, Morrigan!Would it *kill* you to put some clothes on before you call me?"

"Why, dear Alphel, does the sight of my magnificent body offend your poor, innocent eyes?"

The huge red orbs surrounded by darkness within the crystal ball narrowed. "No, but it makes me hungry."

"I don't mind," a dreamy voice that sounded like hundreds of insect legs scratching across chitin - which was exactly what it was - commented from the second crystal ball.

"What, you called Arachne too?" Alphel's crystal ball seemed to rotate as she faced the other orb, which showed something like a red-eyed, moving mosaic. "Hormonal as always. How do you do it without even having a body any more?"

"That's beside the point," Morrigan interrupted, stretching. "Actually, it was her who contacted me first."

"Yes," the scratchy, inhuman voice replied. "This is about Keeper Mercury. Keeper Midori must have contacted you too by now."

Morrigan just nodded, while Alphel let out an angry growl. "That peddler approached me, yes. Her information sounded outlandish, at best."

"I have, however, verified it. I found an iceberg wreathed in storms that has been converted into a floating dungeon not far from the location she indicated." Arachne's voice, consisting only of dry scratches, sounded smug.

"Huh? Wonder how he found that out," Alphel's deep voice sounded from her sphere.

"Arachne, get to the point. I was in the middle of something pleasant," the muscle-bound colossus muttered, gesturing below.

"Of course. While I'm confident that old 'Emperor' Zarekos will beat back her incursion, she'll always have a secure retreat as long as her swimming fortress exists. We can't have that."

"You want to attack the thing? Even without a portal, it's pretty huge and could hold a lot of troops. Whoever assailed it would be working under the same limitation and have to get through its traps, too," Alphel pointed out.

"Which is, of course, why I propose that we do it together." A chorus of insects speaking in a sing-song voice was one of the more disturbing things that Morrigan had heard during his long existence. "She won't be able to fend off our combined forces."

"Let's assume that I was - hypothetically - willing to agree to this," Morrigan said as he took a deep breath from his pipe, "how would we even get our troops there? Even I don't have enough teleport-capable minions."

"We ship them in, you dolt. We don't have to destroy the dungeon right away. What's important is that is will no longer be a safe hideout for her." Alphel pointed out. "We'll just have to make our own icebergs, load them full of troops, and strike at her at the same time!"

"That's stupid. If we make icebergs, we should just crash them into hers and mop up the survivors," Morrigan said with a sneer.

"Spoken like a true worshipper of Azzathra. Brawn over brain."

The muscular Keeper's face reddened in anger. "Watch your tongue, vermin!"

"I don't have one, you fool," the cloud of insects in the crystal ball chirped mockingly.

"*Children*. Can we get back on topic? I do, in principle, agree that we should team up on that blue-haired brat, but the plan needs some more-" Alphel's voice stopped abruptly when the orb transmitting it

shattered into a cloud of fine splinters that spontaneously combusted before they could reach Morrigan's skin. A moment later, Arachne's sphere shared its fate. The Keeper pulled back his extended index finger, blowing the smoke off of its fingertip.

Soft arms wrapped in black leather bands snaked around his chest from behind, and a female voice breathed into his ear. "Master? You didn't hear them out?"

"Any plan that involves either Alphel or Arachne is a bad plan," he said as his left hand wrapped around the woman's much smaller one. "I will crush this Mercury myself!" A squeeze, and sharp snapping noises came from his closing fist. The body draped around him went rigid from the sudden pain, and its owner moaned, half in agony and half in delight. "But for now, I shall indulge myself."

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Cruising Along

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Ami let out a sharp breath as Cathy's training sword clashed with her own, pressing down from above with enough force to make her knees buckle. White-knuckled fingers tightened around the handle of the blue-haired girl's two-handed weapon as she resisted the blonde's attempt to overpower her, causing a fierce grin to appear on her opponent's face. Leg muscles moved under the sweat-covered skin of the gym short wearing girl as she realised that she was not going to win this contest of strength, getting ready to propel her to the side. With a sinking feeling, Ami noticed the scar running down the female soldier's right cheek bend outward when her grin widened. Despite the warning, the young Keeper reacted a moment too slow when the weight of the blonde's weapon suddenly disappeared. No longer encountering resistance, Ami's blade shifted upward, giving her larger opponent the opening she needed. An unexpected impact just below Ami's ribcage drove the breath from her lungs, and a moment later, her backside crashed into the sand covering the arena floor. "Stop!" she shouted, putting a stop to this bout. Wheezing, she put down her weapon and straightened her white shirt that now sported a sand-coloured footprint directly above her stomach, slowly rising back to her feet. "That was more intense than usual," the teenager commented, frowning at the wooden weapon in Cathy's hands.

The blonde's grin turned sheepish as she followed the young Keeper's gaze and spotted the many dents and splintery craters marring the edge of the battered training implement. She let out a short, embarrassed laugh as she brushed her hair out of her face. "Ah. I guess I'm still a bit annoyed at Marda," she admitted. "I find losing to a troll rather humiliating, so I may have overdone it a bit." Seeing that the younger girl's weapon was in the same condition as her own, she added "I think that's enough for today."

While Ami wasn't the greatest fan of physical exertion, she could see the value of Cathy's insistence not to let the teenager's combat

skills atrophy from disuse. Still, without the constant looming threat of an approaching duel to the death, she was always glad when their exhausting training sessions came to an end. At least it was good exercise, and working on her reflexes would also benefit her when she fought using her magical powers. "Thank you for the lesson," Ami said, bowing shallowly in her opponent's direction, and then summoned two towels, one of which she handed to Cathy. The blonde was neither sweating as much nor breathing as hard as Ami, but she was still in need of a shower.

"Thanks." Cathy stretched after drying her face and grimaced, grasping her left upper arm with her left hand. "Yeah, I overdid it. I'm feeling pretty sore."

"Me too," Ami admitted.

"Is that so? Then I have something that might help," a mental voice intruded.

Both girls turned toward the slightly ajar door, where what looked like a green and black lump of wriggling tentacles was spilling in through the gap. "Yes, Tserk?" Ami asked warily.

"Well, I figure that I still deserve a special reward after my outstanding performance retrieving your favourite minion, so...

Ami's red eyes widened, and she blinked sceptically as the tentacle monster presented its suggestion, while Cathy cocked her head and frowned at the monster, the corners of her mouth turning down in suspicion.

"Eeeeek!" A meaty thud followed upon Cathy's outraged scream when she kicked the sack-like main bulk of Tserk's body. Her bare foot sank deeply into the limp, slimy mass, which quivered like jello from the impact.

"What?" the creature blubbered, sounding offended and confused.

The blue-eyed blonde sitting on the white-padded bench right next to the twitching pseudopods took a deep breath, which loosened the

towel she was wearing. Annoyed, she pulled it tauter around her chest and glared at the black and green monster, whose many eyes stared back, unblinking. "Don't touch me with those cold things! Did you dip them into ice water or what?"

Ami was lying a similar bench as the blonde and looked up from her book, blinking at the sudden violence. She rolled onto her side to face Cathy, resting the weight of her upper body on her elbow. Like the warrior, she was only wearing a towel. Despite having her own misgivings about the creature's idea, she thought that it deserved at least a chance after it had retrieved Jadeite for her. "Tserk is amphibious and well insulated against losing heat," Ami explained as she peered through the surrounding steam. "That's why its limbs feel cold. You should take a dip in the warm pool before we start," she said to the tentacle monster, who obediently slithered to the smaller of the basins and slid inside without making a noise.

Cathy kept glaring at the bubbles rising from the pool. "See that this doesn't happen again! And if you touch anything you shouldn't, I'm going to boil you and make soup out of you!"

"As if the Keeper would let you," the mental voice muttered, low enough that whether or not Tserk had wanted to be heard remained questionable.

"What was that?" the blonde bared her teeth at one of the eye-covered appendages that protruded from the basin like a periscope.

"Yes, commander," came the louder reply, sounding exasperated.

Barely mollified, Cathy lay down on the bench, looking up at the swirling clouds of fog and steam that filled the room and gathered most densely right underneath the low ceiling. The baths weren't particularly hot or damp, but Ami had created a few mist generators to ensure privacy just in case someone decided to scry on her at the wrong time.

"This had better be worth it," Cathy muttered. "Why again did I let myself talk into this?"

"Ahhh, this feels great," Cathy sighed in bliss at the sensation of strong appendages kneading her sore muscles. If she was a cat, she would have been purring.

On the bench next to her, Ami was still lying on her belly, with one arm dangling over the edge and the other flipping a page in her book, looking completely relaxed. Even the red glow had retreated from her eyes for the moment, leaving them their natural blue. She let out a contented sigh when one pseudopod applied pressure to just the right point between her shoulder blades, prompting her strained muscles to loosen up. "Tserk, where did you learn how to massage people like that?" Ami asked as she enjoyed the tentacle monster's ministrations. "That's not a skill that I would have expected from someone like you."

"One of your fairy prisoners insisted on teaching me," the large creature positioned between the two benches explained while its multiple tentacles continued their work. *"There was some trial and error involved, but unfortunately, her sisters did not-"*

Ami's head suddenly shot upwards when the light emitted by the warding bracelet around her left wrist startled her. "Someone is scrying on us," she said, sounding irritated, and sat up, brushing aside Tserk's tentacles and making sure that her towel was still in place. "Shabon Spray!"

"Gah! COLD! Don't do that!" Cathy screeched when the low-temperature magical fog mingled with the already existing steam, hiding the room's features with wafting banks of faded grey. Ami ignored the soldier and stared into the already glowing crystal ball that had landed in her lap, focusing on tracing whoever was spying on her. With practised ease, she discarded the useless perspectives, leaving only an image of the culprit in the cloudy interior. From the minor drain on her magic, she could already deduce that this were neither her friends nor Beryl. A local, then, and an enemy Keeper too, if the red-glowing eyes were any indication. As the image became clearer, she realised that she knew these haughty features, accentuated by pointy ears. "Princess Julia," she said to herself as she recognised the elf sorceress who had visited her ship for a short time.

"I see my minion made a lasting impression," the woman in the crystal ball spoke with a strangely monotone voice, startling Ami and nearly causing the surprised girl to drop the fragile orb. "However, you are currently talking to Keeper Midori."

"What do you want?" Ami asked, unable to keep some hostility from her voice as her body instinctively took on a more guarded stance. This was an enemy Keeper, after all, no matter whom she looked like.

"Right to the point, with no taunts and no banter? Did I interrupt something... fun?" The red-eyed elf woman shifted her head in the crystal ball, as if she was trying to peer past Ami. "Very impolite that, you know. And that fog takes all the fun out of watching. Keeper Morrigan's much more easy-going about that kind of thing."

"Um," Ami was at a loss for words as she looked at the mischievous smile that seemed wrong on elfin features entirely unused to that expression.

Seeing the look of confusion on the blue-haired girl's face, Midori continued "Don't understand? Well, I have pictures!" The Keeper in the brunette body snapped her fingers, and the perspective in Ami's crystal ball changed to a scene that consisted predominantly of flesh tones.

The teenager's eyes widened in surprise, and she quickly covered her eyes with her fingers, turning beet red. "Not interested!" she squeaked.

"No? I would have thought someone of your reputation would enjoy this kind of thing. Oh well." Midori's voice remained more cheerful than its lack of inflections should have allowed.

Peering experimentally through the gaps between her fingers, Ami noted with relief that the crystal ball was showing the face of Princess Julia again. Uncovering her eyes, she frowned at the picture. "Why did you contact me?"

"Because I thought you might want to know that I sold the information about your current whereabouts to Keepers Morrigan,

Alphel, and Arachne," the other Keeper said.

Ami blanched, her face going from deep red to parchment white in the span of seconds."You-?Why tell me this?" *This is bad. My security relies for the most part on secrecy.*

"So you'll put up a good fight, of course. A one-sided battle isn't much fun to watch. Besides, you'll want to buy information on some of them from me sooner or later, so the first warning is free!"

"Information? You sell my location to my enemies, and then you expect me to be willing to buy something from you?" Ami let some of her irritation seep into her voice. Getting angry was better than focusing on the sudden, nagging worry that made her heartbeat speed up.

"If it's any consolation, I'm willing to sell out the others just as fast as you," Midori said, feeling no remorse at all.

Ami's jaw clenched and she took a calming breath. From a pragmatic point of view, not considering the opportunity offered by the other Keeper at all would be stupid. "All right. What are your prices?" she asked with some curiosity.

"Nothing as banal as mere gold," Midori answered immediately. "You see, I am a collector of sorts. I collect interesting creatures as well as those with exotic skills. From what I have seen so far, you do have an interesting sorcerer for whom I'd be willing to offer-"

"No way!" Ami interrupted, outraged at the suggestion that she would trade her employees like slaves.

A pout appeared on the brunette's red-painted lips. "Don't be so quick to overlook the benefit of accurate intelligence on your enemies, especially if it comes at such a low price. You can simply replace-"

"This conversation is over," Ami declared as she cut power to the crystal ball, which went dark.

"I'll organise the goblins so they'll patrol the ship constantly, and assign more warlocks to scrying on the surrounding waters," Cathy

offered, all business as she hurried toward the exit. Her haste might have had to do something with the goose bumps that formed on the exposed parts of her skin due to the now frigid air.

"Thank you," Ami nodded. "That's a good start. I'll have the ship change course, too." Frowning worriedly, she slid off the bench and disappeared in a flash of blue.

"That was incredibly poor timing," Tserk, now alone in the baths, sulked. Three main eyes swivelled in the direction of the forgotten crystal ball that rested inertly on the bench Mercury had occupied moments before. A tentacle rose into the air, its end curled to resemble a fist. *"Keeper Midori, I shall have my revenge!"*

Time passed, but despite Midori's warning, no enemies had shown up over the following days to disrupt the dungeon's war preparations while it journeyed towards the Avatar Islands, wrapped in a perpetual thunderstorm. Ami was still nervous, but it was more of a general feeling of wariness, rather than the dread she had felt the first evening after Midori's announcement. During that night, she had tossed and turned in her sleep and woken several times from nightmares that featured assassins teleporting on board, killing her and sending her back to Azzathra. She had been sorely tempted to summon Jadeite as a reassuring teddy bear again - it would have been so easy with her Keeper powers, too - but the knowledge of how embarrassed she would have been in the morning helped her fight down that urge, if barely. With dark rings under her eyes, she had gathered her more intelligent employees in the throne room and inquired about possible security improvements. The alarm traps that Marda's trolls had suggested and later crafted had gone a long way to disperse her fears about being caught unaware and helpless by potential intruders. However, the fairly simple devices were not the reason why she was now standing on a catwalk overlooking a long, hot, and red-lit room.

One of the labouring trolls below looked up and spotted her, and his maw split into a wide, crooked grin."Keeper!" he shouted loudly in order to be heard over the din of hammers slamming down on red-hot metal. "Best forge ever!"

Ami smiled at the sentiment and waved a greeting. The greenskins approved of her new, electricity-powered furnaces that needed no back-breaking labour to keep the flames going hot enough, which also cut down on the fumes that would otherwise have filled the air with choking soot. Likewise, they were getting good use out of the electromagnet-equipped cranes that she had introduced. She hadn't come here to chat with the trolls, though. Her gaze swept over the assembly line, where hollow mechanical figures of black metal were slowly taking shape as skilled, muscular workers hammered out their component parts and welded them together. Ignoring the line of unfinished automatons, she continued seeking for her quarry. It didn't take her long to locate the sole purple robe moving around between the busy workbenches. Without hesitation, she disappeared from her perch and teleported in front of the black-haired warlock, who shielded his face with both arms when she suddenly appeared in front of him. "Hello Erasmus." She inclined her head in greeting and smiled apologetically. "Sorry for the inconvenience, but you need to stop the production of the Mark I gold-to-magic adapter immediately and destroy the already finished specimen."

The wizard stroked his oiled beard, which was barely longer than his nose. "Indeed? Is something wrong with it?" he asked, sounding worried. As the lead designer of the complicated device, he carried responsibility for the project, and his employer was a Keeper. Sure, she had been pleasant enough to work with so far, but... At least she didn't look angry.

Ami shook her head. "No, it's working fine, but I have decided to switch to a one-way power cell design," she explained, unfolding a number of sheets covered with schematics for him to see.

The man's eyes flitted over the diagrams and numbers. "Hmm, cylindrical, takes up around twenty percent more space than mine. Advantages?"

Ami gripped her right hand with her left and let them dangle down in front of her legs in the way she was used to. "Security. I don't want my enemies to get their hands on this technology. The contained gold is a secondary concern."

The papers blocking her view of the warlock's head rustled. "Self-dissolution mechanisms?"

"Yes, worked into the mantle."

"Triggered by?"

"Power drain going below or above specified ranges once activated, exposure to air, exposure to light."

"Risky. This rune could be replaced by..."

As Ami continued talking shop with the wizard, she felt more of her remaining anxiety drain away. Her minions were competent - or at least motivated, in the case of the goblins, her treasury was filling by the day, and her preparations were even a bit ahead of schedule. Perhaps everything would work out well in the end.

Underneath the surface of the sea, the huge, torpedo-shaped body of a whale parted the waters, unimpeded by the vagaries of the storms raging above. Its horizontal tail fin propelled it easily through the greenish-blue darkness, and small bubbles surrounded the large animal like pearls. Its curiosity prompted it to advance toward the enormous shadow that hung in the water, over a dozen times longer than the whale. Faint lights shimmered within the enormous mass, gleaming and glittering underneath the ice and looking brighter than they really were by contrast to their surroundings. The whale approached, diving in an elegant arc past a jutting protrusion that shone particularly bright. The pale light that momentarily illuminated its skin revealed that the graceful aquatic mammal was in worse shape than it appeared at first glance. Thick veins pulsed under patches of skin that showed deep fissures, and the creature's left eye looked as if it had been filled with milk that was long past its use-by date. A few more tail strokes carried it underneath the iceberg, where it swam upwards until its back bumped into the uneven ice above. Thick air bubbles streamed from its blowhole before something clogged it from within. The inflamed flesh around the opening bulged and distended as a white and silky cone forced its way through, accompanied by blackish blood mixing with the

water. The animal twitched and jerked, beating its fins for a final time and went still, except for strange squirming motions underneath its skin that looked as if worms were tunnelling through the cooling flesh. With a sickening ripping sound, the blowhole burst apart when the insect limb reaching through it toward the ice forced its way through, gluing the sticky silk attached to its tip to the frozen surface. With the dead whale tentatively anchored to the iceberg, the huge black spider living within the animal's mouth emerged through the widened opening in the whale's back, moving easily in the bloody liquid as it crawled across the giant corpse. Soon enough, more threads tied the deceased animal to the ice, but the spider was not satisfied with its work until the body had disappeared completely under an upside-down silk tent.

Far away, the malevolent intelligence that was Keeper Arachne cackled in anticipation as her minion secured the recently expired carcass to the unclaimed underside of her enemy's floating dungeon. The corpse would provide food for the thousands of spider eggs stored within the thin tunnels that had been driven into the dumb animal's flesh, consuming it slowly from within as they matured. That would take a while, of course, but the vermin-loving Keeper was nothing if not patient, especially if a plan didn't cost her anything aside from some attention now and then to send more food toward her growing underlings. Oh yes, Keeper Mercury would pay for her transgressions in time. Waves went through the flying cloud of insects that formed Arachne's body as she laughed while the ice dungeon continued on its course, its inhabitants unaware of the deadly stowaways lurking in the depths below.

A Call from Home

Originally on 2010-06-05T01:33:00

"All right, I think I got it this time. Mareki, please repeat what you did just now." Ami observed the energy flows within the green-clad youma's body with the aid of her visor, and her fingers flitted over the keyboard of her computer as she adjusted the sensor parameters. The reptilian creature suppressed a sigh and focused her magic into her flexing claws, which caused various rune-encrusted metal coins strapped to her limbs and body to light up. Ami furrowed her brow in concentration, but was interrupted by the warding bracelet around her left wrist lighting up. By now, summoning her crystal ball and tracing the observer back to the source had become an easy routine. Upon seeing who was spying on her, Ami's face lit up. "Mareki, you can go for now. This will take a while. Thanks for your assistance."

"Finally. No more poking and prodding! These things chafe!" the youma brushed the measuring instruments attached to her off and headed toward the door at a brisk pace that was just short of a run, slamming the door shut behind her.

Wincing at the loud noise, Ami slipped behind her desk and carefully set the crystal ball down on a blank spot among the books and documents. The image within showed the familiar interior of the Hikawa shrine, where her friend Rei knelt with closed eyes in front of the sacred fire, long black hair reaching down to her red-clad legs as she meditated. Behind the shrine maiden waited three more figures on tatami mats, eyes widening in excitement as they watched the vision in the flames. While Ami immediately recognised the black mooncat on the left and the pigtailed blonde in the centre, the tall brunette wearing an unfamiliar school uniform to their right was a new face. *That must be Sailor Jupiter,* the blue-haired girl concluded, remembering what she had been told about the newest addition to the team. She was strong and used lightning, and a good fighter was just what her friends needed to keep them safe. The smile on the pony-tailed girl's face was polite, rather than being as

radiant as Usagi's, and almost eclipsed by the unabashed curiosity with which she stared into the fire. Makoto's narrowing green eyes told Ami that the girl's first impression of her missing team mate wasn't altogether positive.

Makoto Kino gazed into the vision within the dancing flames with mixed feelings. Aside from the creepy red eyes, Sailor Mercury looked gentle enough, but those glowing orbs were rather difficult to ignore. The others seemed to trust Ami, but Makoto herself had never been able to meet her and form her own opinion. Despite knowing who Sailor Mercury was, it was hard to recognise her as the girl whose face had been all over the city on missing person posters - a grim reminder that the fight against the Dark Kingdom was not a game, and that serious consequences could and would happen if one wasn't cautious. Makoto also didn't know what to think of the fact that Sailor Mercury had a dark general working for her, and seeing a youma flee the premises as soon as she was given a chance didn't exactly lay the tall schoolgirl's worries about her displaced comrade's intentions to rest. Not to mention that the military cut of Mercury's well-tailored black and gold getup reminded the brunette a bit of the Dark Kingdom's uniforms. "She's in her transformed form, right?" Makoto whispered into Usagi's ear.

The blonde nodded and kept rummaging in her bag for her written message. The tip of her tongue protruded from the corner of her mouth, so concentrated was she on the task. "She doesn't transform back so she won't be surprised by danger," Usagi explained. "Luna! Where did I put this sheet?"

Makoto kept watching the transparent image in the fire. While she had expected Mercury to wear a regular sailor senshi uniform, she could guess at the reasons behind the changed outfit. After all, she wouldn't want to wear the same thing for months either, and playing the role of evil overlord convincingly in that cheerful getup would be nearly impossible. Since Ami had neglected to inform her friends about her enchanted water induced wardrobe malfunctions, the tall girl remained unaware of a third reason. Regardless of the circumstances, Mercury - Ami - seemed genuinely happy to see her friends, and Makoto's smile became more sincere as she decided to trust their judgement. She waved a greeting at the ceiling, hoping

that this was the right direction.

"Ah, here it is!" Usagi held up one of her notebooks and shook it, causing a large, folded-up piece of paper to fall out. She opened it and enthusiastically raised it in the air. Only Makoto's reflexes saved her nose from a brush with the blonde's left elbow. "Okay, Rei! You can stop now, Ami should have seen the message!"

Stooped over her scrying device, Ami read Usagi's poster with interest. "Hello Ami! We hope you are well! Now that Rei got your attention, please look into her room instead!" Seeing the others file out of the fire reading room, Ami complied, wondering what was up that couldn't be discussed here. Was grandpa Hino around to disrupt her connection? The teenage Keeper concentrated and followed Usagi's instructions. When the raven-haired girl's chamber appeared in the swirling mists, Ami's eyes flew open wide in surprise, and her right hand rose to cover her mouth as she gaped at the large banner spanning from wall to wall which proclaimed in huge letters "Happy Birthday, Ami!" Recovering from the surprise, she also noted the colourful streamers that lightened up the atmosphere in Rei's room. Usagi was chasing Luna with a conical party hat until Makoto approached with a box in her arms, which she deposited on the table. The sight of cake was enough to distract the blonde from the recalcitrant and still hatless feline, and she salivated while she waited for the ponytailed brunette to light all fifteen candles. Meanwhile, Rei was laying down more letters for Ami to read as she smiled at her friends' antics. "Happy birthday, Ami. Even though you can't be here with us today, we haven't forgotten you. We miss you all terribly! This way, you can at least be with us in spirit!"

The letter from Usagi was a bit different. "Makoto baked the cake. It's delicious! Come back soon, she promised to bake another one for you when you get back! We'll keep your presents waiting for you!"

Ami blinked rapidly, and the corners of her eyes filled with tears of happiness at this show of support from her friends, even if it was mostly symbolic. It reminded her of how it felt to just be accepted and loved, something she hadn't realised she missed so much. "Thank you, everyone," she said in a low voice that quivered with

emotion. As there was nobody in the empty room to hear her, she repeated the sentence by telegraphing it to Rei. Her other friends were already writing more letters, updating Ami on the newest gossip and joking around. She was contributing much less to the conversation by necessity, as her only method of communication was so much slower. By unspoken agreement, everyone avoided serious topics in order to not taint the festive mood, and just enjoyed the afternoon.

Later, Ami slid the crystal ball aside and leaned back in her chair, resting her head on its back and looking at the ceiling, deep in thought. The birthday party had come as a complete surprise, even though she could have easily kept track of the current date with the aid of her Mercury computer. It simply hadn't registered as very important with everything else that had been going on. She was glad her friends had tried to cheer her up, she really was, but now she longed to be back with them even more. *So it is the eleventh of September already?* Ami sat up ramrod-straight as a horrible thought went through her head. *Oh no! That means the first trimester is already over! I'm going to be held back a year!* She grimaced and wrung her hands, coming very close to a panic attack. *Easy now. You are being ridiculous. There's nothing you can do about it. You have more important things to worry about!* Thinking logically about the situation helped her get her breathing back under control, but a treacherous part of her brain kept insisting that there was nothing more important than her scholastic performance. When she had calmed down, she reached for the crystal ball again to check on someone else. *If today is my birthday...* Within the glowing orb appeared a woman with short, dark hair, who was sitting at a kitchen table and looking down at a photograph that showed Ami smiling at the camera. Two wet splotches marred the picture, and a piece of cake - Ami noted that it was her favourite - waited untouched to the sophisticated woman's left. "Mother," the teenager sighed and wished with all her heart that she could just reach through the image and comfort her parent.

"Is it just me, or does Mercury look somewhat depressed?" Jadeite

asked as he arrived in the living room, having passed the blue-haired girl in one of the corridors.

"No, slouched shoulders, hanging heads and bloodshot eyes are perfectly normal for happy teenagers," Cathy said in a deadpan tone of voice that left no doubt that she was being sarcastic. Jadeite harrumphed at her reply, which she ignored as she snuggled closer against Jered, who was sharing the couch with the tall woman and had an arm draped around her waist.

"Well, why is she feeling down? Did one of her plans fail or something?" the dark general asked with barely hidden irritation.

The red armchair in the corner creaked as Snyder lowered the tome he was studying and sat up straighter. "It is her birthday, an occasion that is usually celebrated within a circle of friends and family. I would think that she is feeling homesick and missing her loved ones," the redhead explained.

Jadeite remained silent for a while as he paced up and down, crossing his hands behind his back as his lips curved downward in an unhappy arc. After a minute or two, the muffled sounds of his footsteps on the thick carpet ceased. "I don't like it. Why is this nagging at me so much?"

"It's called compassion," Cathy explained, grinning at the curly-haired blond's uneasiness. "It makes you feel bad because she feels bad."

"That seems unfair," Jadeite said, keeping his voice neutral. Dark general did not whine, after all. Well, except for Zoisite, but he didn't count.

With a wink, Jered suggested in a tone too innocent for him to be completely honest "Well, you'll just have to kiss her and make her feel bett- Ow!" The familiar pain of Cathy's elbow jabbing into the weasel-featured man's ribs interrupted him, and he shot his girlfriend an annoyed look over his shoulder.

"Ignore him. He's just poking fun at you," she told Jadeite, who cocked his head and frowned at a blank spot in the ceiling, visibly

thinking about something. With a whoosh of vertical lines, the dark general disappeared. Cathy's shook her head. "Just great. If he acts on your suggestion and upsets Mercury more, I'll hold you responsible!"

Sunlight glittered on the crests of the ocean waves that reflected and the blue tone of the sky, which was marred merely by the occasional cumulus clouds. Only a very keen observer would have noticed the circular area in which the sea's current didn't quite match its surroundings, and where the dancing foam sprayed higher than everywhere else on the vast, featureless expanse. Behind the illusion, a three-masted ship cut through the waters, its white sails swelled by the stiff breeze propelling it. An emblem consisting of three crossed swords within a wreath of laurels shone forth proudly from the white linen of the main sail, proclaiming the vessel's allegiance to the Shining Concord Empire.

On the bridge, a man wearing white trousers and a blue uniform jacket was standing on a rotatable platform, leaning down to look through a telescope that was as long as he was tall. The dish-sized lens of the brass contraption was pointed at a spot on the horizon, and cogs rattled as the man turned a crank, bringing his object of interest into sharp focus. An elongated, deep black thundercloud loomed above a shadow that glided serenely through the churning sea, protected from the violent waters by its sheer size. The enormous, thorny vessel seemed to drink in the light and only flared up brightly when lightning flashed in the clouds above. When it did, it looked as if it was made from pale bone, which did not detract from its menacing appearance.

"I'm getting too old for this," the white-bearded man complained as he stepped away from the device and stretched. The cracking noises in his spine seemed to confirm his statement.

"Your hat, captain!" An insect-winged sailor approached, holding the flaring white crime against fashion reverently between her hands.

The captain put the proffered symbol of his rank back on his head before pulling a pipe out of his jacket pocket and lighting it, all without having to look at what his fingers were doing. Only after he had inhaled a lungful of smoke did he share his findings."Our

informant was correct," he said, snorting tobacco-smelling clouds from his nostrils. "There's an entire damn dungeon floating out there, and it's coming our way."

"The Light will smile down on us in the coming battle," the sailor, an amber-haired faerie, commented.

The elderly man shook his head. "Not if I have anything to say about that."

"Sir?" the woman asked, perplexed.

"What part of 'it's an entire damn dungeon' didn't you understand? We are prepared for ship-to-ship combat, not for conducting a full scale invasion. We will have to let it pass."

"But-"

"Our duty is preventing the evil infesting the island from spreading, not preventing other evil from getting there," the captain explained solemnly. "Which is a good thing, as far as I'm concerned, because a floating fortress full of monsters is way outside of our ability to handle without a lot of backup. Which we will call in, just in case it's planning a round trip. Go and inform the rest of the fleet about this!" He breathed out a thick cloud of white smoke and turned away from the girl, not waiting for her to comply. "Helmsman, get us out of the path of that thing!"

"Mercury? Could you come to the kitchen please?" a male voice called in Ami's mind, and she wondered what Jadeite wanted from her. She stepped in front of a mirror, running her fingers through her blue bangs in order to make herself look presentable, and disappeared in a maelstrom of snowflakes and blue light. The grey-clad blond was already waiting for her, standing next to the table.

"Yes, Jadeite? What do you need?" Ami's eyes widened when instead of an answer, he produced a platter from behind his back, presenting a chocolate cake to her.

"For me?" the blue-haired girl blinked once, stunned by his

unexpected action.

"Well," Jadeite scratched the back of his head "I heard it was your birthday, and, um, from what I remember of human customs, there's traditions, so I bought a cake - I didn't mess up, did I?" He didn't know how to interpret Mercury's astonished stare, especially with her hand covering her lips.

A moment later, a radiant smile banished Ami's dumbfounded expression, and it took all of her willpower to not run over and fling her arms around his neck. *He cares! He really cares!* her mind jubilated. Somehow, she found herself at the dark general's side, becoming aware of the warmth of his white-gloved hand under hers. Blushing, she almost couldn't hear her own words over the sound of her heartbeat as she looked into his steel-blue eyes. "Thank you! That's really nice of you! Don't worry, you didn't do anything wrong!"

Jadeite smiled back, feeling strangely relieved that the girl was happy with his gift. "Should we eat, then?" He asked, gesturing toward the two plates on the table.

Ami giggled. "It's a bit much for only us two. A birthday cake is meant to be shared, and we'll need candles too. I'll get some, can you go and invite the others in the meantime? Only the important ones, of course."

"Even Marda? I don't like that smug troll," the curly-haired blond protested.

"Well," Ami put one finger to her chin as she thought. In a serious tone of voice, she said "She is the leader of the trolls and might take it as an insult if she was left out." Her eyebrows turned into cheerful arcs as she added "But I think it's enough if we just send her a slice."

Sitting on a bench in the training area, Marda took a bite out of her piece of cake and licked her fingers clean, her tongue making rasping noises as it scraped over the metal of her gauntlets. "Keeper's birthday, hmm? I'd have expected more music and

booze." She turned toward one of the trolls that were watching her with envy while she ate. "How old did that pathetic acolyte say she was?"

"Fifteen, my Lord," The broad-nosed warrior replied without hesitation.

"What? Fifteen?" Marda shouted. "I thought she was using magic to look younger!" The armoured troll rubbed her chin, furrowing her brows as she considered the new information. "Being a Keeper at that age should not be possible. Unless - yes." She raised her head, an unreadable gleam glittering in her coal-black eyes. "She must have gotten her first dungeon heart as a gift. Someone powerful - a parent perhaps - backing her also explains her income and her access to advanced equipment. We will have to account for this in our plans. Yes." She proceeded to give her snack the attention it deserved. In the darkness deep below the waterline, uncountable tiny spiders wriggled around the salamander eggs that kept them warm, feasting on dead meat just as greedily as the female troll devoured the last of her sweet confection.

Last edited: Sep 9, 2016

Equipment Test

Originally on 2010-06-12T00:17:00

"Nooo! Not want into coffin! Not dead yet!" the goblin gibbered, arching his spine as he struggled in vain against the leather manacles that restrained his wrists and ankles, tying him down to the interior of the sarcophagus-shaped device. "Stupid troll!"

"Oh, shut up," Marda grunted, giving the coffin's lid a one-handed shove and letting gravity do the rest. With a loud, echoing bang, the container snapped shut, muffling the terrified cries of the slender, green creature trapped within.

"Marda! What are you *doing*?" Ami, who had just appeared within the brightly-lit side chamber of her laboratory, glared at the armoured troll, arms akimbo. Her frown deepened as she took in the pile of bruised and unconscious goblins close to the door. They were lying on the cold floor as if someone - Ami had little doubt who - had just dumped them there as like a bunch of inanimate logs.

"You wanted half a dozen of your best goblins in those coffin things." Marda raised her thumb, pointing in the direction of the grey metal containers arranged along the walls like beds in a dormitory. The troll crossed her arms, unimpressed by the angry red glow intensifying in the girl's eyes.

"*After* I briefed them! You weren't supposed to beat them unconscious, or at all! That was completely out of line!" Ami did not enjoy confrontations, and this one was no different. She hoped that the muscular troll didn't realise just how nervous she was. What was she supposed to do to punish her? She *needed* the troll leader's support.

"Eh, how else was I supposed to figure out which of them sucked the least?" Marda said, sounding bored with the argument.

"You could just have asked their instructor, Cathy!" Ami snapped as she knelt down next to the goblins and checked their injuries.

"Nah. I knocked her out first."

"What?!" Ami stopped arranging the sprawled-out bodies in more comfortable positions and looked up, eyes flashing. "What for?" Immediately, she focused on the blonde warrior's location and was relieved to find out that Snyder was already taking care of her bruises.

"She tried to stop me from testing the runts," Marda smirked, gesturing toward the unconscious goblins.

"That- that's it?!" Ami's face was flush with anger now. "I explicitly ordered you not to antagonise my other employees any more!" Clenching her teeth, Ami stalked toward the sole closed coffin and yanked open the lid, giving herself a few seconds to think. *She's testing the limits of my tolerance. I have to punish her for defying my authority, but I can't risk her or the other trolls rebelling. What do I do?* A look at the troll's smug grin caused her frown to deepen. Impulsively, she lashed out with her Keeper power against the armoured figure, slamming her back into the wall with a loud clang and pinning her down. "I won't tolerate bullying or insubordination," the blue-haired girl stated coldly. Marda cocked her head and rolled her eyes, despite the pressure bearing down on her. "You keep telling me to consider the long term," Ami continued. "You should take your own advice! Do you really think I will have need of your services forever?" Even when angered, intimidation was something Ami had to struggle with, and she had no idea if she sounded convincing enough. Thus, she simply kept staring into the troll's coal-black eyes, hoping that she was coming across as more threatening than she felt.

After a tense half a minute, Marda looked away first. "A fair point," the broad-nosed troll conceded, and Mercury released her telekinetic grip, turning toward the bathtub-shaped device in front of her.

"Me not disobey! Me not do anything wrong! No torture me!" The tied-up goblin within the re-opened coffin blurted out, shaking like a leaf at the sight of the Keeper towering over him with a dark expression on her face and eyes that shone a solid red.

Ami blinked and looked down, remembering his presence. "You aren't going to be tortured," she said, lowering her eyelids and taking a deep breath as she tried to calm down. "Don't worry, you aren't in any trouble. It's Marda who messed up."

"Then you free me now?" The large-eared creature asked, his expression brightening as he pulled demonstratively at his restraints.

"Actually, it would be better if you stayed like that for now," Ami said with a smile that she hoped would reassure the slim goblin. "Don't worry, you are not going to be hurt or harmed. You and the others are going to assist me with a very important experiment. I could untie you, but then I'd have to tie you down again once we get properly started." Noticing the captive creature's face fall, she quickly added "I'm sure you will enjoy the result, though!"

The dubious goblin seemed to think about what kind of 'experiment' could be performed with him lying down in a fairly well-padded coffin, restrained with leather bands, and wearing nothing but a loincloth. After a few seconds, his eyes bugged out as he remembered Mercury's reputation, and he started sweating. "Me is sorry, Keeper, but me think my girlfriend no like that!"

Ami first looked perplexed and then winced once she managed to follow the greenskin's train of thought. "It's nothing like that!" she blurted out, cheeks colouring as she heard Marda snicker behind her. The irritating noise cut off abruptly when the troll disappeared into thin air, evicted from the room by the blue-haired girl's magic. "This is all about making you a more powerful warrior." A metallic headband rose into the air from a wooden bench and drifted into Ami's outstretched hand. Her fingers glowed greenish as she cautiously put the device on the goblin's head, making sure to heal his bumps before she exerted any pressure. "I'll just wake the others first so I won't have to explain this multiple times. Wait a bit, please."

Marda's snicker faded away when the large troll suddenly found herself in a large and cold room close to the surface of the iceberg. She could see faint daylight seep in through the clear ice that formed the domed ceiling, enabling her to take in the unfinished

appearance of the round grotto. Only the floor tiles were made of grey stone whose colour contrasted strongly with the glittering ice that formed the walls. The troll leader wondered if being locked into such a boring place was Mercury's idea of punishment. She didn't quite know what to think of the teenager yet. On one hand, she was a dungeon keeper, and a fairly intelligent and ambitious one to boot. On the other, she was polite and so timid she had to force herself to act authoritatively, if her body language was anything to go by. Her reluctance to mete out punishment at the slightest provocation was puzzling too, if not unwelcome. Still, the blue-haired Keeper's behaviour was something of an enigma for Marda, and she let out an irritated growl. Mysteries were bad. They could get you killed.

Slowly, the troll's eyes were adjusting to the poor lighting, and she could make out a row of six broad-shouldered forms lying on their backs at the opposite end of the room. Each of the identical figures was at least one and a half times as tall as Marda and gaunt enough that ribs were showing through the metallic skin covering their chests. With a start, the troll leader recognised them as the automatons that Mercury had been working on. While she digested that new information, one of the things started to stir, raising a huge, clawed hand into the air in a probing motion, like a mime trying to find his way out of an invisible box. There was a sound like a sword sliding from its sheath when another of the automatons sat up, moving as smoothly as a suit of master-crafted full plate mail. It was Marda's first glimpse of the whole construct, complete with head, and she took an involuntary step back. The dark silhouette with the v-shaped pair of horns could only have been modelled in the image of a horned reaper. If there had been any doubt about that, then the long scythe with a crooked blade that the automaton was wielding would have eliminated it at once. More of the automatons twitched and stirred like ancient behemoths waking from an aeon of hibernation. Horned, faceless heads turned to gaze at the chainmail-clad troll with pairs of bluish-glowing discs where their eyes should have been.

Ami strode through the room holding the six sarcophagi containing the restrained goblins, all of which were currently closed and

occupied. "Are the screens working in there?" she asked loudly.

"Yes." "Yep." "This magical window is screen?" "Me no have window! All dark!" "View is strange!" "Mine moving!"

"No window?" Ami stepped toward the closed capsule whose occupant had complained about darkness and used her Keeper sight to see inside. Indeed, the interior section of the tub-shaped lid around the goblin's head remained an inert and reflective surface.

"Can't see!" confirmed a muffled call from within the container.

Ami walked around the device with her Mercury computer in her hand while she searched for the problem. "Oh, got it!" One of the electrical cables going into the side of the capsule wasn't plugged in properly and hissed from time to time as it threw sparks. No wonder it wasn't working if it wasn't getting power. There was no way a goblin had enough magic to activate a large scrying pool on its own. *Or should I call it a scrying aquarium instead?* After all, the thin layer of water was behind a curved plate of smooth glass that surrounded the goblins' heads in such a way that it simulated their natural field of vision. The shape was a bit of successful improvisation, as none of her library books had mentioned using containers other than bowls or wells, which could only provide flat, horizontal surfaces. The lore only stressed that the water had to be calm. *I'll have to teach my friends the required spells and take some of the pressure off of Rei,* Ami decided, even if she had to figure out how to transmit the prerequisite magical diagrams via Morse code somehow.

"Still dark here, Keeper!" the goblin reminded her, drawing her attention back to the situation at hand.

A quick shove, and the plug slid into its socket, re-establishing the connection. With a faint hum, the electricity-to-magic adapter hidden within the coffin-like machinery hummed to life. "Can you see now?"

"Wish me couldn't. Can see ugly face of stupid troll now!"

That was a 'yes' then. With the point of view of each screen permanently linked to the eyes of one of the reaperbots, the goblins should be able to see Marda, who was in the same room as the

automatons.

"Why we chained up?" one of the goblins piped up, and Ami suppressed a sigh. That very same creature had asked that same question already a few minutes ago.

"So your real bodies don't move when you move the remote bodies," she explained patiently. "You wouldn't want to bash your head into the coffin lid, right?"

"Would hurt," the goblin's vacant voice agreed. Ami suspected that he would have forgotten her answer in another minute or two.

"Limbs feeling odd!" another tiny voice complained from underneath a closed lid.

"That's normal. You aren't only feeling your own limbs, but the headband is also making you know the position of your automaton's body. You should get used to it soon enough," Ami addressed the greenskin's concern. "Now, does anyone else have problems?" Nobody replied, and she nodded in satisfaction. "Good. Please try to walk around for a bit and get used to your new weight and size. Oh, and don't trip on the cables - never mind." The blue-haired girl was watching her pilots' progress remotely and winced when one of the large automatons crashed to the ground, the impact of its knee cracking a floor tile. "All right, don't get discouraged. In real combat, you won't have to deal with those wires." Under Ami's watchful gaze, the lumbering figures pulled themselves slowly to their feet and staggered around on wobbly legs. This could take a while, she pondered. It was a good thing she didn't have to power the automatons with gold during training. Speaking of which...

With a blue, snowflake-spraying flash, Ami appeared next to Marda, who had been watching the automatons take their first steps.

"Everyone, listen up!" Ami shouted, and the six metal constructs turned to face her, their movements already more secure than only moments before. "I think a little practical combat training would be best, given that these automatons are meant for fighting. Thus, you are going to spar with Marda here," she said, gesturing toward the armoured troll. Startled, the large creature swivelled her head to her

right and stared at the Keeper.

"After all, they deserve a rematch," the blue-haired girl said with a wink before vanishing within a swirl of snow. Marda blinked rapidly at the six scythe-wielding behemoths stomping slowly towards her. If their faceless helmets had mouths, they would have been grinning evilly.

"Ow, that was brutal," Jered commented while observing the raging battle through a transparent ice wall. "Pass the cookies, please?" Without taking his eyes off the fight, the weasel-featured man reached for the plate that his girlfriend was holding, only to feel the last two snacks slip through his fingers and rise into the air. Puzzled, he looked up and spotted them hovering toward the extended hand of the grey-uniformed figure leaning against the wall in the back of the room.

Jadeite caught one of the pastries in a white-gloved hand and took a bite out of it. Before Jered could complain, metal rattled loudly in the chamber below. "Hmm. It looks like Marda can move pretty fast when she has to."

"I suppose that's one way to disarm someone," Cathy commented as a severed metallic arm flew past their observation spot, the scythe caught in its frozen grip spinning like a propeller.

"...hmm, stress factor of the steel not holding up," Ami muttered as she appeared out of a flash of blue, fingers nearly blurring as she typed away at the Mercury computer's keyboard. "Unfortunately, I didn't get a good angle on tha- eek!" Ami's head rocked back and her eyes widened when something round, golden-brown, and bumpy suddenly filled her visor's field of view, much closer than the expected battlefield.

"Cookie?" Jadeite asked, smirking as the startled girl focused on the pastry waiting a few centimetres in front of her nose, held by a white-gloved hand.

"Um, thanks. I- oh, they are circling again!" With a swirl of

snowflakes, Ami was gone, reappearing at the opposite side of the battlefield, which offered her a better angle for recording the ongoing fight.

Shrugging, the curly-haired blond shifted his attention back to the entertainment in the arena-like room when a particularly tormented-sounding screech of metal against metal echoed through the chamber.

"Whoa, she shoved its own scythe up its..." Jered blanched slightly as he watched in horrified fascination.

"Unconventional, but it certainly stopped the bot." Cathy sounded impressed despite herself. "Good thing Mercury is taking note- Shit! Did she just hammer that last reaperbot straight through the wall?"

"Well, yes, but the wall *was* made of ice," Snyder pointed out, nervously backing away as Marda's stocky silhouette strode through the new opening. The last falling ice splinters still in the air pinged off of her chainmail shoulder guards as she followed her victim outside. A quick tug, and the already rising automaton sank back to the ground, bereft of its power cable.

"So much for that," Marda said, wiping away the blood that was trickling down into her right eye from a cut in her brow. "I do enjoy a mildly challenging workout from time to time. We should do this again some time, Keeper." She grinned crookedly at Mercury, revealing unnaturally white-looking teeth. It was not a friendly grin, and Ami understood its meaning immediately. "Is that all you can do?" it seemed to say. Ami's idea for punishing Marda had backfired, due to the young Keeper underestimating what the troll was capable off. With a self-satisfied smirk on her face, the armoured creature wandered off. Ami sighed as her gaze wandered over the battlefield littered with mangled steel.

"Scary," Cathy commented, blue eyes wandering from the automaton that was cocooned in its own cable to the one that was stumbling around without its head and bumping into walls.

"I'm not too impressed. She's stronger than we thought, but the Reaper could have done that. Much faster too." Jered's evaluation

cheered Ami up a bit.

She nodded to let the wavy-haired man know that she agreed with his assessment. "That is true. The automatons may look like him, but they have only a fraction of his power. Besides, they were controlled by very inexperienced pilots."

Cathy shook her head as she surveyed the now quiet battlefield. "I think she was still holding back."

"Why? What makes you say that?" Ami asked, looking at the blonde woman with a sudden sinking feeling.

"She could have ended the fight nearly instantaneously by severing the power cords, but instead, she played around and got creative dispatching them. Someone who is feeling seriously threatened doesn't do that. I suggest that you investigate your footage very carefully."

"She's nothing to worry about," Jadeite said, puffing out his chest. "I can take her easily. So can Mercury when she doesn't have the deck stacked absurdly against her."

"Thanks." The blue-haired girl blushed lightly at the vote of confidence from her love interest.

"However, you should keep your water hand technique secret from her, just in case," the dark general continued. "That way, you can surprise her if she decides to turn on you." Jadeite proved that his evil grin was at least as sinister as Marda's, and with a start, Ami realised that it was infectious. *One of these days, I'll be laughing maniacally without realising it.*

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Invasion Planning

Originally on 2010-06-15T22:36:00

The sound of three male voices chanting in eerie unison resonated through the high and bare chamber as a hair-rising tension built up in the air. The trio of warlocks stood at the points of an isometric triangle that surrounded a magical circle etched into the ground, and purplish arcs of lightning crept across their raised hands. Ami squinted, protecting her eyes against the glare of a ring of blue flames blazing within the arcane diagram, glad that the black-painted wall of the casting chambers swallowed the brilliant light, rather than reflecting it back. In front of each of the backlit silhouettes of the wizards stood a pedestal with an open tome on top. The gale blowing outward from the magical circle rattled the chains that kept the books opened to the right pages, and made the warlocks elaborate robes flutter around their legs.

Ami was watching the procedure with great interest, ready to interfere at a moment's notice if something went wrong. She could cast this transportation spell without assistance and from memory alone, but had no need for it. Instead, she would teleport to a small city on the western continent and extradite the employee on a mission there personally if her warlocks failed to perform the retrieval spell properly. Under her alert gaze, a rotating pillar of flame rose up in the centre of the diagram, sucking in the blue fire forming the circle. It spun, shot upward like a fountain, and expanded violently when the voices of the mages reached a crescendo. Ami felt a blast of hot air wash over her face and arms where they weren't protected by her Keeper outfit, and blinked to clear away the phantom specks spinning across her vision. Through the transparent curtain formed by the rapidly fading flames, she could see a new arrival. Wrapped from head to toe in dark leathers that were now even darker from the residual soot, he was carrying a bag nearly as tall as himself and didn't look important enough to warrant all this effort. His green face swivelled back and forth as he stared at the taller wizards surrounding him, and his noise twitched at the smell of burning incense.

"Welcome back," Ami greeted the disoriented goblin, waving her hand to catch his attention. Addressing the warlocks, she continued "Good work everyone. I'm very satisfied with your progress. You may take the rest of the day off, I have no more need for your services right now."

All three warlocks bowed their heads and turned to walk toward the exit, which left the goblin free to deliver his report. "Mission successful!" he squealed, bringing his right hand in a sloppy salute that barely failed to crush his ear.

Ami nodded, but froze suddenly and called "Watch out, your bag!"

The large, squirming bag slung over the goblin's shoulder, no longer secured by a two-handed grip, slid down the greenskin's back as the coarse fabric slipped through his grasp. Hindered by bite-covered leather gauntlets, his fingers were too stiff to get a hold of the sack before it hit the ground with a muffled thud. Even before it touched the floor, a pressure from within enlarged its opening. Panicked rats popped out of the top, fleeing their claustrophobic prison in a wave of grey, bald-tailed bodies.

"Oops! Rats fleeing!" the goblin shouted, putting his hands on his head and somehow managing not to prick them on the two short horns on his helmet. Dismayed, he leaned down and made a grab for the fast and frightened animals. "Oh no, you go back into- Argh!" A furry form leapt with an angry hiss, and the goblin staggered backward, now with a rat chewing on his nose. A moment later, he lost his balance when more of the rodents got underfoot, and disappeared under the wriggling grey carpet. Half-crazed by the smell of fire and the unfamiliar surroundings, the pink-tailed rodents scattered in all directions, spilling over the lines of the arcane diagram and onwards. Then, they spotted Ami, who was watching the minor disaster with widened red eyes and both hands covering her mouth. As one, they turned tail and fled in the opposite direction, toward the warlocks who were already half-way to the door. Alerted by the rapid pitter-patter noise that the rat swarm's feet made on the smoothed stone, the powerful magic users turned their heads and caught a glimpse of the fuzzy tide sweeping in their direction. Dignity forgotten, they lifted their robes and sprinted for the exit, chased by the squeaking mass that smelled like frightened animals.

Ami grimaced. These were wild rats, plucked fresh from city sewers, and they hadn't been long enough in the dungeon to fall under her influence. Thinking fast, she transported herself and reappeared in the open door frame. Immediately, the animals at the front sensed the great evil lurking suddenly ahead and reversed direction, slamming into the ones behind them. Rodents tried to climb over each other, tripping and squeaking in protest as the two groups moving in opposite directions collided. The chaos lasted only for the few heartbeats that the rats needed to reassess the situation, and soon enough, all of them were fleeing away from the door, heading for the corners of the room that put the most distance between them and the blue-haired girl. Ami smiled, satisfied that this problem had been nipped in the bud, but then let out a squawk and flattened herself against the door frame as the three hurried warlocks barrelled past, beards trailing behind them.

In the centre of the room, the goblin stirred and groaned as he pulled himself to his feet, glancing cautiously at the rats huddling against the far wall, and then to the opposite side of the room, where the Keeper was slowly going through a sequence of arm movements that ended with both palms close together and extended in his direction. The creature's ears drooped, and he gulped in fright.

"Shabon. Spray. Freezing." Ami went through the motions of her strongest sailor senshi spell with deliberate slowness, gathering sufficient power for the magic by stretching out its casting time. Shimmering bubbles shot from her hands and in the direction of the leather-clad goblin, who eeped and shielded his face. Hearing a faint clinking noise, he cautiously reopened one eye and peered past his raised arm. A hip-high barrier of ice now blocked the exit from the room, trapping the escaped rodents within. Standing behind the glittering wall, Ami shouted at the goblin "You! Go tell the Beastmaster about this, and help her collect the escaped rats!"

"Yes, Keeper," the green humanoid answered with a resigned sigh, rubbing the tooth marks on his nose. A brief moment of concentration on Ami's part yanked him through space and deposited him in the straw-covered chamber full of stacked cages, saving him the trip. Returning her attention to the local room, she watched the covering rats for a while, and mused out loud "That

could have gone much worse."

Footsteps echoed through the corridor, announcing Jered's approach. "Conclusion: always expect the goblins to screw up an otherwise flawless mission."

"Only one out of the five dropped his bag," Ami pointed out, shaking her head in mild disapproval. "You are starting to sound like Marda," she teased, lips curving upward in a small smile when the wavy-haired man faltered in his step.

"Oh, that was a low blow." Jered clasped his heart theatrically. "Still, while I can see the wisdom in stocking up on more rats before we invade, why use the warlocks? Wouldn't it have been much faster for you to just retrieve the goblins and their cargo yourself?"

Ami nodded. "Of course, but the point was for the warlocks to get some practice casting that spell. I want them to be able to use it in the coming battles."

"For simplifying logistics over disconnected territories, you mean?"

"That's one application, but I would prefer it if all of the conquered territories remained contiguous. Defending more than one dungeon heart without the benefit of being able to call in reinforcements with Keeper transport is something I want to avoid, if at all possible." Ami fell in step beside the wavy-haired man as she continued her explanation. "I want to use the spell against the enemy directly."

Jered scratched his chin. "How? The magic needs to build up at the retrieval location for a few minutes, and the gathering energies are very obvious. Blindingly so", he said, referring to the fiery light show.

"True. But tell me, where do vampires sleep?"

"Coffins. Oh, I see!" Jered's mouth split into a grin that mirrored Ami's own. "Not much light or wind getting into those, and sleeping vampires don't move." His brows furrowed into a frown. "Still, isn't that risky? Even if you treat them to a free sunbath, you'd still need to kill them before they can get at the warlocks."

"Not a problem," Ami said, stomping her foot on the ground a few

times demonstratively. "Remember where we are?"

The new planning room that Ami had built during the last few days of the journey was dominated by a map of the Avatar islands and their surroundings, which alone took up as much space as her entire living room. It rested on a square table that modelled areas of the continent that Ami had accurate information about by mimicking the terrain and its colours. The parts that were not rust red, black, or ocean blue denoted regions that her warlocks had not yet scryed on, and they took up much of the inland.

"That's the last dungeon location that I know of," Marda said as she jabbed a small blue flag with a black bat on it into one of the grey regions. Ami counted eleven markers distributed all over the map, concentrated more densely around the southwest. Which made sense, as she had found the trolls in that region.

"Good, that's useful information," the young Keeper said. "Which ones belonged to Mukrezar?"

Marda shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. We'll just have to take out all of them."

"That's the plan," Ami agreed. "In any case, those markers should help us identify our first target. Our current location is around here." She placed a flag with an aquamarine Mercury symbol into the ocean, just off the north-west coast.

"Wait, we are this close to the shore already?" Cathy asked as she walked around the table and took position at Ami's side, staring down at the flag.

"Yes. We will get into sight distance of the continent any day now, which is why the topside entrance needs to be guarded around the clock."

"Are you expecting Zarekos to be able to detect us this far out?" Jadeite asked.

"He'd have to be blind to miss the thundercloud in the sky above us,"

Cathy pointed out. "An undetected approach is, sadly, out of the question."

"Yes. Fortunately, he could only attack us with ghosts at this distance, and without backup, we should be able to stop any number of those without too much trouble if we can hold a choke point, like the entrance," Ami explained with a forced smile. The prospect of fighting so many potential enemies was still daunting, despite the positional advantages offered by her floating dungeon.

"I concur with hat estimation," Marda chimed in. "We held off waves of them often enough with nothing but wards, narrow corridors, and a few blackpowder bombs. The only danger are invisible ones slipping past unnoticed and lying in wait until they can slip into some helpless sleeper's bed to suck the life out of him."

"Gee, I needed that mental image," Cathy complained, shuddering. "Just imagine grabbing for a blanket and getting one of those *things* instead!"

"Don't worry, I'll add a few mist generators to the gate to reveal the invisible spectres," Ami promised, patting the blonde on the back reassuringly.

"Actually, I would be interested in seeing the designs for those wards you mentioned, Marda. Perhaps I could assist in their construction with my not inconsiderable skills," Snyder said. When the armour-clad troll failed to react to the suggestion and continued acting as if the redhead wasn't present at all, he frowned in irritation. Turning to Mercury, he asked "What if they breach the walls instead and sneak on board that way? Ice is rather less solid than ground or stone, after all."

"I can sense when the dungeon is damaged," Ami assured him, "nobody will be able to get in unnoticed like that."

"We would lose the windmills if we faced a massed assault, though," Jadeite said, looking at a floor plan of the iceberg pinned to the wall. The tall towers with their spinning blades were marked in bright orange, denoting an exposed area, while the location of the dungeon heart was not indicated at all. "We don't have the means to

properly defend against an attack from the air. Got any solutions, Mercury?"

The blue-headed girl walked over to her desk and summoned her Mercury computer. After typing away for a while, she shook her head in the negative. "I could increase the violence of the corruption storm, or I could slowly whittle away at a siege with my own power. In either case, we'd lose the windmills, either to storm damage or to enemy action."

"What would the consequences be?" Marda asked, her coarse features all business.

"Less gold to go around," Ami said, closing her palmtop. "I'd have to fix the windmills and have to run the dungeon's magic and defences on gold during the blackout. It would be a setback, but a recoverable one. Unless it happened too often in rapid succession."

"Right. We'll just have to hit Zarekos so hard that he won't even think of being able to spare troops for a counterattack, then!" Cathy punctuated her statement by slamming her fist down on the map.

"Indeed. Which brings us back to selecting a target for our attack," Marda grunted. "Any suggestions, Keeper?"

"Our first priority is destroying one of Zarekos' dungeon hearts before he realises that we are going after them," Ami pointed out and glanced at the map. "That will establish a zone where he can't simply drop reinforcements, and we can use the period during which he is banished to secure our foothold and strike at the neighbouring hearts!"

"We wouldn't have to go through that trouble if Marda and her trolls would just let you summon a dungeon heart on their island," Jered commented, shooting the broad-nosed creature a poisonous look.

"Out of the question," the troll snapped, frowning at the weasel-featured man. "It's our sanctuary and refuge in case something goes wrong, which we have bled to defend! It shall remain inviolate!"The weasel-featured man glowered while Ami and Jadeite exchanged a glance behind the broad troll's back.

"Anyway," Ami interrupted the brewing squabble, "it has to be somewhere close to the coast. We need water to keep the vampires away. Optimally, it would be an area that our enemy has little reason to keep an eye on." She waved her hand, making yellow circles appear around the bases of three of the flags that denoted the presence of an enemy dungeon heart. "That leaves these."

"That one is out." Jered pointed at the southernmost of the blue and black flags. "That's where your previous invasion failed. Get too close to that region and you'll be banished again."

The girl's eyes widened, and her paling skin formed a stark contrast with her deep blue bangs. "Really? Yes, you are right," she said, shuddering at the memories. "I hadn't recognised the area from the map alone. Let's keep well away from that one. Jadeite, can you show us what the Underworld looks like around the remaining two locations? "

The curly-haired blonde nodded, and his eyes shone white from within as the light seemed to drain from the rest of the room, leaving only the map to glow unnaturally from within. Transparent pictures of bizarrely shaped islands floating freely in nothingness appeared above the two marked flags.

"That's what the Underworld looks like when mapped?" Cathy's blue eyes were very large as she leaned forward curiously, taking in the phantom sights. "It looks a bit like demented snowflakes."

"I'd have said puzzle pieces, myself," Jered commented. "Very interesting how there are connections between some. Wait." His eyes crossed as he looked closer. "Are those two places overlapping? How does that work?"

"If you think that's confusing, you should have been around while I was trying to map that," Jadeite smirked. "Space is just strange in that place. In any case, there are enough magma flows close to the northern location to make it susceptible to a portal-based lava attack. The southern one, not so much."

"Hmm, it might be better to keep our ability to do that a secret for now so we can use it when it really hurts the enemy." Cathy

cautioned.

Ami closed her eyes as she pondered the advice. "I'll have the warlocks survey both locations thoroughly and calculate the odds for different strategies before making a decision," she declared. "For now, I need you to get the troops ready and the equipment prepared. Cathy, you are in charge of getting the goblins up to speed. Marda, you make sure that your trolls are combat ready, they may be needed to support the automatons, though it's more likely that they will remain here on guard duty. Snyder, please double-check the equipment in the new command centre. Jered, please prepare an up-to-date list of the traps and magical items we have in storage, and a few of each ready to be shipped. Jadeite, I will need a small, fast, and stealthy transport ship to get the troops to the coast."

"All right!" Cathy saluted, and so did Jered, albeit in a mocking way. Marda inclined her head acknowledging her orders, Snyder simply nodded, and Jadeite bowed, putting his arm across his chest.

"What about the youma?" the curly-haired blonde asked, not yet leaving.

Ami, who had just retrieved her palmtop, looked up. "Mareki is eager for battle, but won't need any lengthy preparation. Umbra is still recovering." That wasn't true, and she was well aware that Jadeite knew the veil-wearing youma was in perfect health. Her answer let him know that the creature was still away on her secret reconnaissance mission. Ami focused briefly on the youma's location deep within the bowels of Marda's island. Even knowing what to look for, she had trouble spotting the pool of darkness creeping along tracks in the ceiling. The two trolls it was trailing remained blissfully unaware of the youma's presence. "Finally," the blue-haired girl looked down sadly, "our unknown third guest is still in the cell block, alternating between staring into the air and attacking the bars in a berserk fury. I hope she'll snap out of it sooner or later."

"Hrm. That's a slight improvement over bashing her head into the wall constantly, at least. I think it's safe to say that she won't be participating in the assault." Jadeite nodded and walked away,

leaving Ami to ponder the fate of the insane youma. It was a good thing that the dungeon heart could keep prisoners from teleporting, acting as an anchor of sorts. It was still theoretically possibly for a being that was such bound to teleport out, but only if it was powerful enough to take the entire dungeon along for the ride. Unfortunately, that method wasn't particularly useful for keeping someone out, or Ami would have a headache less. Putting that thought out of her mind, she opened her computer, staring in concentration as reflections of letters and numbers started racing across her red-glowing eyes.

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The Opening Strike

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"You are looking different today, Keeper." Marda pulled herself to her full height, straightening her spine in order to avoid having to look up at Ami's face. For a troll meant to stand hunched-over, this meant thrusting forward her belly comically. The ever-present furrow between the armoured creature's protruding eyebrows deepened as she pursed her lips in disapproval. "Too much orange."

The teenager couldn't help but agree with Marda's assessment upon spotting her reflection sliding across the smooth ice walls. Like Mareki's body before, that of the unknown youma whom Ami was possessing right now had changed in appearance to become more similar to the young Keeper's original form. She speculated that the effect had been even more pronounced because the youma's mind was all but blank. Using possession for mental therapy could theoretically work, at least if she could find a mind operating on more than animal-level intelligence. Which wasn't the case with this victim of the eternal sleep, at least not without delving deeper into her brain than Ami deemed safe.

Unfortunately, the adaptation had proven insufficient to get rid of the youma's garish colouration. Ami's blue hair had mixed with the being's straw-like blond spikes, painting the bangs green. She looked a bit like a tiger-striped carrot right now, she thought resignedly. Ami hadn't found out yet whether her current host had any special powers beyond being huge and muscular, but she still preferred this body to Mareki's. It had no tail and was much closer to her natural shape, aside from the size. While she now sported goat-like horns, those were the youma's only inhuman features, and they weren't affecting her balance nearly as much as the increased weight on her chest that bounced with each step. Noting Jered's fascinated stare, she looked down and discovered that sailor senshi uniforms did reveal quite a lot of cleavage, provided it existed in the first place. She frowned and resisted the urge to cross her arms and cover herself. If the brown-haired man's girlfriend had been present

right now, he would have earned himself another elbow to the ribs. "Jered, were there any difficulties with the preparations?"

With reluctance, the weasel-featured man's gaze wandered upward until he met her red-glowing eyes. "Nothing, everything you wanted is waiting right here." He turned sideways, indicating the stack of crates waiting in the back of the room along with a triple row of automatons. Even squatting inactive on the ground with their knees pulled up to their wide, skeleton-patterned chest, the reaperbots made for an imposing sight.

"The landing ship is ready as well," Jadeite said as his grey-uniformed form peeled itself from the shadows. The curly-haired blond lowered his head in a court nod as he approached. Ami never noticed the dark general's gaze stray lower than her neck, but she wasn't entirely sure if she felt pleased or irritated about that. On one hand, this wasn't her body, but on the other, he never seemed to pay much attention to her even when she was herself. Or anyone else, as far as she could tell, though the only other human-looking females around were Cathy and Mareki's human form. It was frustratingly difficult to determine whether he was interested or not. Maybe she needed to be more aggressive? Glad that her orange skin hid her blush, she dismissed the conjured mental images that popped up involuntarily. She should be concentrating on the mission instead.

The green-haired girl focused her mental gaze to the immediate surroundings of her iceberg, where a much smaller, elongated vessel swayed on the waves. Submerged almost completely in the violent sea, the cigar-shaped vessel had been fashioned from a hollowed-out piece of ice, and its smoothed hull showed no hatches or other entrances that would allow seawater inside. The interior, all owned territory claimed before the vessel had been chiselled loose from the main ship, provided all the cargo-moving capability that Ami could possibly need. Lacking a direct connection to her dungeon heart, the claim would revert quickly once the ship moved further away, but at that point, its hold would already be filled with troops and gear. Since Ami had last checked on the boat, its clear ice walls had changed due to Jadeite's work. Rough, transparent surfaces now showed the dull sheen of curving metal, making it resemble a

modern submarine in appearance. It had no engines, but according to the curly-haired blond, his glamour would make it move exactly like one anyway. Trying to wrap her head around the magic just knowing what to do, with no discernible mechanism for how it worked, gave Ami a headache. Was mere intent enough? In any case it was an intellectual problem she suspected she would have to dedicate some time to in the future. A short glance to the left, where a delightful frost pattern embellished the wall, was enough to confirm that. The corruption flowing into the world through her dungeon heart twisted and remodelled the environment in a way that seemed almost intelligent in the way it avoided disturbing the functionality of her dungeon. If there was intent involved here, she wondered just whose.

"Thanks, Jadeite. Everything looks all right." Ami smiled in the taller man's direction, and piece by piece, the inventory in the room disappeared as she stowed it away neatly on the even decks of thethe landing ship.

"We are going to attack at noon, then?" Loud footsteps made by the blond's boots echoed through the emptying chamber as he a paced around, brimming with energy in anticipation of getting out and doing something.

Ami nodded while loading the final pieces on the vessel. The bundle of long, golden rods intended to fuel her mechanical army glittered in the light before vanishing from sight. "Yes, from what we know vampires prefer to be active at night, and the skeletons and ghosts don't have eyes, so I doubt darkness would help us avoid their senses."

"Zarekos won't know what hit him," Jadeite boasted, baring his teeth in a cruel smile before vanishing into vertical black streaks.

Ami's new command centre was slightly smaller than the one she had constructed in Malleus' old dungeon, mainly because it didn't have to accommodate a huge, self-updating map of the combat area. Ami missed having the aquarium filled with liquid golems in all colours of the rainbow around, but as long as she wasn't able to create imps, she would be unable to replicate it.

"The invasion craft departed a moment ago, and I am taking command of this operation while Mercury is out in the field. Do not disappoint the Keeper!" Cathy throned on the elevated command chair at the very back of the rectangular room, looming above a disgruntled Marda, who muttered about being much better suited for that job, not for just a lousy advisory role. In reaction to the blonde warrior's announcement, the screens along the sides of the room lit up, illuminating the waiting black silhouettes sitting in front of them. Waxy-skinned faces that looked sculpted from light and shadow leaned in closer to the magical mirrors as the warlocks started their incantations. Like the facets of an insect's eye, each of the flat, arcane devices showed a slightly different perspective of the scorched land that was the enemy's location. The images flickered and moved as viewpoints drifted apart and each spellcaster searched for potential dangers.

"Goblins, get ready to disembark at my command!"

A chorus of short, muffled affirmations came from the double row of child-sized, coffin-like capsules that lined Cathy's seat on both sides. One after the other, the lids snapped shut with metallic clangs, hiding the large-eared green occupants within. With a satisfied grunt, the tall woman wearing a Sailor Mercury uniform let herself sink into the chair and looked up to the canvas on the opposite wall of the chamber, where the projection of a metallic-looking cylinder was burrowing through the crimson waves as it headed for the shore in a straight line.

The horizon looked as if it was on fire where it met with the maelstrom of reddish-orange clouds spiralling in the sky. Even Ami's visor, which filtered the tones and overlaid them with sensor data, could not dispel the illusion completely. The currently green-haired teenager's heart was hammering in her chest as she surveyed her surroundings, hovering a metre above the desiccated black dust. The knowledge that a single mistake, a single overlooked ghost lurking about invisibly, could jeopardise the entire assault injected much unwanted excitement into the otherwise boring chore. Satisfied that none of the undead beings was hiding within a fissure or within the frothing pools of stinking yellow fog that seeped like pus

from the underground, she teleported back a short distance to where her metal behemoths were crouching in a shallow depression, keeping their horned heads down.

Ami cast a quick spell on her right eye and formed the word *"Report!"* in her mind. Moments later, the dreamlike mental voices of the scrying team back on the iceberg updated her on the situation.

"Skeletons milling about in the valley north of your destination, but they have no line of sight."

"All clear near map sector B-four."

"No unusual activity from the ghost village to the east.

Ami let out a relieved breath. Without constant supervision, ghosts seemed to congregate in places that had been dear to them in life, even if they were nothing more than scorched ruins and rubble by now. That, or the creatures simply preferred places that were less exposed to the caustic rain. Whatever the reason, Ami was glad that the spectres stayed out of the way for the most part. Avoiding Zarekos' notice until it was too late was the key part of her plan. From the point where her scythe-wielding automatons had cracked open the hull of their transport like an eggshell to the time they reached the enemy dungeon heart, stealth was vital. If caught in the open where the vampire lord could bring the numerical superiority of his undead hordes to bear, her troops would be annihilated, regardless of any qualitative superiority. *And we might not even have that, if the vampires join the fray personally.* That bleak thought resting heavily in her mind, Ami scanned the hilly countryside once more before waving her reaperbots forward. The band of around thirty hulking monstrosities followed the trail of a stream of lava, close enough that its heat blistered the black lacquer covering their frames. The roaring and hissing of the molten metal masked the splintering noise of pebbles being ground to dust underneath steel feet, and the procession moved onward in apparent silence, unimpeded by the weight of the crates that the automatons were carrying.

A few uneventful, but still nerve-wracking hours later, Ami nearly jumped for joy when the terrain feature that had made her choose

this target over its alternative came into sight. Like a gaping wound in the rock, a straight and fairly recent crevasse lay before her. She floated closer and let herself sink into the dark abyss, drifting down past layers of differently-coloured rock until she spotted the first artificial tunnel that had been neatly bisected by the fissure. Any Keeper could feel when their dungeon was breached, so the pre-existing damage was a godsend. Feeling grateful for the additional strength and reach that her borrowed body provided, Ami helped her bulky automatons with the difficult descent down the near-vertical incline. Secured by ropes and the Keeper's telekinetic powers, the steel warriors walked down the wall one after the other, with the floating girl flitting about and giving the goblin-piloted devices a hand whenever one of them stumbled. A loud scraping noise startled the sweat-drenched teenager when brittle rock shattered beneath one of the metal soles and showered her with dust and pebbles. The reaperbot in question lost its footing, and Ami reached it just before the heavy automaton, dangling from its rope like a wrecking ball, could slam into the flank of the crevasse and cause a landslide. With muscles aching from grabbing the thing by its arm and slowing its swing enough that the impact merely caused a loud clang, she watched as the first of her soldiers reached the brick-framed gap leading into the enemy dungeon. The pauldrons guarding its shoulders scraped over stone as the machine squeezed through the opening, dislodging a few bricks and caking its black exterior with flour-like dust as it pushed through the rubble blocking its path.

"That way." Ami was at the head of her forces, leading them toward the source of the slow, rhythmic thumping that echoed through the underground, coming from deeper within the dungeon. The young Keeper had her troops move at a rapid pace. For one, her large and stomping warriors were controlled by goblins and poor at moving quietly, for the other, Zarekos could decide to focus his attention here at any moment and discover them. Granted, the danger was vanishingly small, as there was no reason for the vampire to check up on the empty corridors that had been abandoned for so long that even some of the magical torches that lit the place had dropped from their holsters. Ami hoped not to provide him with one. She cautiously stepped around a pool of greenish liquid gathering at the

left side of the slightly inclined floor, having spotted the discoloured gauges that the substance had etched into the bricks and murals where it trickled out of the ceiling and ran down the wall. Some of the caustic precipitation on this hellish island must have seeped into the ground deeply enough to reach these tunnels, she figured. Peering ahead, she spotted more of the pools glistening in the wavering twilight, dispensing an acrid stench as they slowly ate into the red-patterned floor tiles. It *probably* wouldn't be strong enough to harm her steel warriors.

"Step lightly so you don't splash this stuff around, and keep the crates dry," she ordered the pilots back at the base before continuing onward, followed by the scythe-armed behemoths tiptoeing after her. The group moved through an empty hall with an arched ceiling, where lighter spots on the floor and walls still showed where furniture had once been. If Ami's guess was correct, then the room had at one point been a barracks for the guards of the nearby dungeon heart, which should be at the end of the long, trap-filled corridor behind this place. However, an obstacle in the form of a sturdy iron door impeded their progress. Just battering it down, while perfectly within her capabilities, would have drawn Zarekos' attention instantaneously.

"Jered, please take care of this." As Ami gave the mental command, she pointed at one of the wooden crates carried by her reaperbots, motioning for it to be placed in front of the door. Like a jack-in-the-box, a much smaller, fragile-looking automaton with long, articulate fingers popped out and leaned forward to inspect the lock. Picking up a set of jingling lockpicks, it started poking at the rusty keyhole. Immediately, sparks raced down the automatons arm, and the smell of ozone filled the room when the touch set off a trap. Unimpressed by the voltage that would have floored a regular thief, the automaton continued its work, eliciting clicking noises from the lock.

"It's also barred from the other side," the voice of a warlock informed the currently orange-skinned girl.

"I'm on it," Ami declared. In her mind, she visualised the scrying mirror that the warlock in question was using and summoned her Keeper hand made of water. Controlling it without a direct line of sight proved difficult, but opening the massive bar that kept the door

shut didn't need precise manipulation. Of course, the fake wall exploding into a shower of shards and releasing a round boulder that smashed the liquid limb into a useless puddle made even imprecise manipulation difficult. Startled, Ami took a step back, waiting for the rumbling to subside as the heavy boulder rolled back and forth behind the door, up and down the ramps placed to guide its course and turn the bodies of any intruders caught in the trap into a fine pulp. Finally, the thing came to rest, and Ami repeated her efforts, unimpeded this time. With a loud scraping noise, the bolt slid back and the gate swung open, revealing the corridor behind it and the boulder that filled it near completely. The young Keeper contemplated the obstacle for a moment, raising her clawed left hand to her lips. *"Are there any alarm traps I can't see from here behind it?"* she asked her warlocks.

"Checking," came the whisper-like reply, and Ami had to wait for a few minutes as the magic users intensified their scrying efforts. *"None that we can detect, Keeper."*

Ami smiled, revealing her borrowed form's sharp fangs. "All right, everyone. Start pushing that thing down the hallway!"

Its surface peppered with craters, deep gauges, and red-glowing scorch marks, the boulder shuddered to a halt and broke apart, weakened too much by the multitude of mangled blades and bent spikes sticking out of it. No longer absorbed by the rolling shield, a bolt of lightning struck the foremost of the metal soldiers, melting its elbow joint with a hiss. Ami darted out from behind the broad-shouldered automaton and thrust out her hands, palms facing forward. A scintillating stream of bubbles shot toward the crackling aperture in the ceiling, covering it in a thick layer of ice just before the white glow within built up and discharged with a blinding flash. Ice cracked, and hissing blasts of steam shot through the fissures, but the plug held long enough for the device to expend its remaining charges. Less winded from casting the quick Shabon Spray Freezing than she had expected, Ami peered over her cover and ahead toward where the chamber widened. In regular intervals, the shadows within retreated before the white glare of the pulsing dungeon heart it contained, revealing the gargoyle-heavy

decorations that snaked up the support pillars. Too bad that it was hard to appreciate their artistic value through all the red outlines denoting traps that her visor overlaid her view with. "Shabon Spray!"

Like a blanket being scrunched up, the banks of conjured mist pulled together and concentrated in one spot. The myriads of tiny water droplets in the air flowed together, forming a single body of liquid that sprouted five fingers. Ami's Keeper hand, as big as herself, lowered itself to the floor, pointing at the ground. Walking on middle and index finger, it launched itself forward into the killing zone. Just like the cowardly goblins that piloted them, the horned automatons cringed away as explosions and whirring blades filled the hallway, ripping into the decoy. The corridor flashed and rumbled as if a miniature thunderstorm was raging within, with blasts of flame and electricity taking the role of lightning, stabbing spikes providing the sound of hail, and hissing poison gas valves that of howling storms. Upon noticing the toxic clouds, Ami retreated to a safer distance behind her warriors. She had to replace the animated hand every few seconds, whenever it was blasted apart, vaporised, or frozen solid by the relentless assault. With each twitch of its fingers, the traps seemed to redouble their efforts, until they had spent their fury several long minutes later. Covering several pitfalls that hadn't been triggered by her decoy with ice, Ami motioned for her fireworks-watching troops to advance and surround the enemy dungeon heart. *"Cathy, they are all yours while I make the final preparations. Make sure none of them touch the dungeon heart before I'm ready!"*

Most of the remote-controlled automatons dispersed throughout the scarred and smoking room and took up guard positions. Others lifted equipment from the crates, revealing magic wands and bulkier weapons than their scythes, which needed to be assembled on the spot. Ami busied herself by first creating a ring-shaped, hip-high ice fence around the dungeon heart and her troops, and then cast spell after spell, nearly shouting herself hoarse in the process of filling this improvised pool with water. Meanwhile, three of the reaper-looking automatons approached the steps leading up the dais where the enemy dungeon heart throned between four skull-topped pillars. The metal of their joints groaned as they aligned a drill as large as a young tree with the centre of the majestic crystal, holding it like a battering ram. On the other side of the glowing artefact, a second

team of warriors was just done assembling an actual battering ram and getting ready to storm ahead. Another of the black metal beasts was exchanging his scythe for an oversized pick, while yet another affixed a giant axe head to the haft of his weapon. A bit behind them, two of the bots were putting up a desk that had a long row of finger-thick magic wands glued to its surface, all aimed directly at the enemy dungeon heart. They contained a few charges of various attack spells. Ami certainly wasn't going to test what worked best against those artefacts on one of her own.

Droplets of water dripped down from Ami's wet boots as she floated upwards, lifting herself out of the now knee-deep pool of ice-cold water surrounding the dungeon heart. Satisfied with the state of the preparations, she hardened her features and raised her hand. "BEGIN!" she ordered, bringing the arm down like a guillotine. With a shrill whine, the drill started spinning when one of the automatons inserted a rod of gold into its end. On the other side of the dungeon heart, water sloshed and sprayed as the battering-ram wielding fake reapers stormed up the stairs. Some of the other automatons stormed in the direction of the glowing orb, but most just raised their scythes, taking broad-legged ready stances. The tip of the first magic wand sparkled, unleashing a forking bolt of blue lightning. It struck the smooth surface of the orb at the same time that the drill's whine turned into a high pitched shriek. A split second later, the glowing crystal rang out like a bell when the iron goat face topping the battering ram slammed into it hard enough that even the golden troll statues supporting the heart shuddered. The dungeon heart's steady beat halted as if the object had been startled. A moment later, it picked up again, more intense than before. A thin white mist spiralled down from the top of the chamber. *Not mist. Ghosts!* Ami realised, her own heartbeat speeding up too. "Shabon Spray!" Her fog covered the pool like steam rising from a kettle, hopefully neutralising any invisibility shenanigans the enemy might be up to. Ami's head whipped around when she spotted fast movement from the corner of her eyes, accompanied by a furious scream that turned into surprised terror. She was just fast enough to see a robed form that had suddenly appeared among her troops burst into flame and turn into a tar-like ooze that left behind the stench of rotten corpses as it disappeared. A second vampire teleported in and nearly managed to complete his transformation into a bat before the effects

of being over water disrupted his body.

Ami slashed with her Keeper hand through the cloud of ghosts above, managing to tag two or three as the rest drifted out of the way. She had time to spare a glance at the dungeon heart, which seemed to drink in the magical barrage from her wands. A droplet of water splashed against its semi-transparent shell and immediately started sizzling. Was the heart looking smaller already? Ami's attention was diverted by the sudden rain of skeletons that fell from the ceiling, already hacking around with their curved sabres and wicked hooks before dropping into the water. She ducked underneath a gleaming arc and dispatched her attacker with a slap, then had to teleport out of the way when two more of the undead menaces lunged at her from behind. The surrounding water frothed as if it was boiling when her reaperbots fell upon the animated piles of bone and sinew. A skull that still had a few strands of greying hair remaining burst into shard when two fists impacted its cheeks at the same time from opposing sides, pulverising the fleshless head between them. A scythe whistled through the air, and Ami heard bones splinter as it cleaved right through a corroded sabre and its wielder. Her goblins, being in the unfamiliar situation of fighting opponents smaller and weaker than themselves, fell upon the opposition with the rabid zeal of repressed bullies, hacking, slashing, and crushing relentlessly. Wherever Ami looked, bones splintered and blades lashed out at armoured shells. She jumped away to avoid the grasp of a skeleton that was little more than a ribcage with attached arms dragging itself her way, and took stock of the situation. Despite the fact that the skeletons were dying at a horrendous rate, their numbers were swelling. Zarekos was adding more, faster than her troops could kill them. She glanced worriedly over at the dungeon heart, where the whine of the drill cut off with a sudden snap. The sturdy crystal had shrunk and squeezed off the part stuck within, she saw. "Use your scythes instead!" she shouted at the automatons, who were staring dumbly at their now useless tool. Her Keeper hand flashed out once more, batting away a trio of skeletons coming her way, and then moved to help up an automaton that had slipped on a scattered bone. A sudden gust of wind ripped her fog apart and nearly bowled her over. Steadying herself against the force, she raised her left arm to shield her eyes against the droplets of water that shot toward her with the speed of bullets. A

reaperbot flew past, spinning like a top as it ascended on a parabolic arc that ended violently at the opposite wall. Following the loud clang, metallic parts rained down on the battlefield. Ami lowered her arm and peered over it at the black-robed figure standing on dry ground behind the barrier of ice that delimited her pool. The bald, pale-skinned man was veiled in ghosts and still had his arm stretched out in the destroyed automaton's direction. Narrowed eyes like triangular torches stared back at Ami.

"Zarekos!" she shouted, recognising the vampire in the red-embroidered robe at once.

"That's *Emperor* Zarekos to you, upstart!" the enemy Keeper replied coldly, shedding frozen ghosts like a snake shedding its old skin when a hasty Shabon Spray Freezing struck him head-on. From the corner of her eyes, Ami saw that more bloodsuckers were following the example of their master and teleporting in beyond the edge of the pool. She gritted her teeth. If she wasn't on his territory, she would already have frozen them all with undodgeable spells retrieved from storage.

A sickly-looking female in a black dress walked uo too close to the edge of the water, and the closest reaperbot's scythe lashed out at her neck. With a maniac giggle, the vampire dodged, reached for the haft of the weapon with a blurring arm, and tugged. Caught off-balance, the automaton went over the barrier and landed in her lap. Ami winced at the loud crunch when the frail-looking woman broke the metal warrior in half over her knee. The moment of inattention cost Ami, as she doubled over from a sudden, intense pain above her heart. Disappearing in a swirl of snowflakes, she clutched at her chest. Warm wetness drenched the fabric of the ribbon attached there. The purplish blood crept over the skin of her hands and flew off sideway's toward the vampire lord, who was pointing at the position where she had just been. Shaking her head to clear away the dizziness, she teleported again in order to make herself a harder target. She felt wobbly and weak, but there didn't seem to be an actual wound. The dungeon heart had lost about half of its diameter by now and pulsated every second, giving the illusion that the battle raging around it was taking place in freeze-frame images. Bleached skeletons filled the pool so that it looked as if there were more bones

than water, and they were driving back Ami's troops. Even more alarming were the clinking noises from the ice dam. The vampires had just shattered it in one spot, and the water that was warding them off started to pour out.

"Shabon Spray Freezing!"

The spell re-froze the breach, at the cost of making Ami the sole target of any remaining ghosts in the area. Chased by the life-sucking spectres, she had barely enough time to keep closing the gaps that the vampires were hacking into her barrier. She was losing more and more water! Her eyes widened as a red-robed monster balanced on the ice, dipping his right foot experimentally into the less than a palm deep liquid. When nothing happened aside from the shoe getting wet, he crowed in triumph and took to the air, heading straight for her with extended claws and ravenous hunger in his dead eyes. A punch with the Keeper fist flattened him against the ground, but Ami had to keep zigzagging wildly to lose her other pursuers. The strobe-like flicker of the damaged dungeon heart indicated that it was very small by now, but the other vampires were darting toward her troops, blurring as they stepped on the skulls of the skeletons in their way, or simply clearing the distance with long jumps. Metal screamed as it was torn apart by inhuman strength, but Ami could also hear the nauseating sound of steel cutting through flesh as the reaperbots lived up to their name. Still, Ami couldn't afford the current attrition rate. Well, she didn't need the ice barrier any more. Focusing inward, Ami could feel gold drain away in her treasury, transformed into arcane power as she put her index fingers together in a prayer-like gesture. With the energy throbbing in her veins, she shouted "Down, everybody!" and released her spell. A searingly-bright flash went off, accompanied by a boom that shook the foundations of the room. A spherical wall of fire exploded outwards from just above the dungeon heart, washing over the combatants. Only charred bones remained of the skeletons, while Ami's own troops, glowing a dull red in places, were scattered all over the place, lying in the steaming puddles that remained of her pool. The horrible screams of vampires running around with their robes on fire or rolling themselves on the floor seemed oddly subdued in comparison to the thunderous noise of the fireburst spell, but the pork-like smell rising from the creatures' burnt flesh was still

enough to make their young opponent feel nauseous.

With a sinking feeling, Ami realised that less than a third of her forces were still functional. Unharmed by the flames, they pulled themselves to their feet, but a few of the slain bloodsuckers were already reviving and teleporting in with red flashes, attacking the metal warriors closest to the dungeon heart. Still, with the enemy dungeon heart smaller than a volleyball already, her troops should be able to shatter it any moment now. A whooshing noise from behind caused the girl possessing the sailor-suited youma body to teleport away reflexively. Before her eyes, the troops fighting on the dais around the rapidly-beating heart, friend and foe alike, were blown away by a violent gust of wind, tumbling and trailing sparks as they skidded over the hard floor tiles. Zarekos again. Of course she hadn't actually managed to get the bastard with the explosion. Of course. Floating on a cloud that surrounded his feet and shielded by his ghosts, the master vampire looked entirely unimpressed and ready to call more of his forces in. This wasn't going we- *Of course!*

Zarekos smirked dismissively as Ami summoned her gurgling Keeper hand again, flinging it right at the him. Fully expecting his spectral shell to protect him from the spell, the vampire didn't even attempt to dodge. The bug-eyed expression on his arrogant face when the semi-physical attack's giant fingers closed into a fist around him nearly had her laugh out loud. His dumbfounded look of outraged disbelief vanished from sight when his head snapped back from sudden acceleration. The contact with the watery fist caused tiny tongues of flame to trail the vampire as Ami hurled him toward his dungeon heart with all the force she could muster, wielding the flaming body like a cudgel. The evil being had no time to realise what was going on before the violent impact smeared him all over the pulsating orb and its surroundings. The remains dissolved into a black mist and disappeared. Underneath the gore, the surface of the dungeon heart was covered in cracks and leaking strange, grasping tendrils of white lightning. With a final, ear-splitting bang, the evil artefact burst apart, sending out a shockwave of darkness that shattered its pedestal, the surrounding columns, and pushed the closest combatants off their feet. The entire dungeon quaked and groaned as shattering floor tiles jumped out of their positions and new cracks crept along the walls.

Ami wasted no time fighting the remaining vampires and hurled her remaining troops through space, depositing them back on the iceberg. She teleported out just as the dungeon let out a loud, final groan that sounded like the dying gurgle of an enormous animal. At the same time, a dark dust cloud that resembled a misshapen skull in the right light rose from its location.

"Good work!" Jadeite was grinning when Ami appeared out of a blue flash in the command centre.

She answered with an exhausted nod and walked over to the occupied command throne."We don't have any time to lose before Phase Two! With Zarekos banished for the moment, his troops are unable to react to our attacks or to get reinforcements. We need to destroy as many dungeon hearts in that time as possible." She glanced over at a map spread out over a table, where four red arrows pointed out the locations of dungeons that could be reached from the coast with a half-day long run at a reaperbot's pace. "Jadeite, Mareki, Marda, you know where to take your squads. Move out as soon as you are ready. Crush any undead you encounter on the way!"

"Music to my ears," the armoured troll commented, already on her way to the door.

Mareki bowed deeply. "I won't disappoint you, Lady Mercury!"

"I will make sure to be the first to destroy the enemy for you," Jadeite promised, inclining his head before disappearing.

"Good. Everyone, do your best! Cathy, make sure to rotate the pilots every few hours. We don't need the best fighters for the journey."

"Will do," the blonde confirmed, standing up from the throne and offering it to Mercury. "Are you sure you want to lead the fourth squad yourself? You aren't looking too well." She pointed at the blood-soaked material between Ami's breasts.

"I'll be all right, I'll just switch bodies," the tiger-striped girl reassured

the older woman. "But now I must be off! Let's see how many dungeon hearts we can destroy while we have the opportunity!"

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Phase Two

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Ami appeared in the small cell that served as her current host's abode. With the comfortable bed in the corner and the beige wall curtains that covered all of the underlying brickwork, it didn't look much like a prison. However, the thick, monochromatic weaves were not meant for decoration. They would keep the tiger-striped creature from injuring herself in the case that she started banging her head against the wall in a fit of insanity. Likewise, the soft carpet that covered the floor was meant to preserve the youma's health. *But I had still had to go and get her hurt anyway,* Ami thought, making a chagrined face as she lay down on the bed's covers. The blood-soaked ribbon on her chest dissolved into blue sparkles, looking transparent for a moment as the sailor senshi uniform faded away. The detransformation left the youma clad in her own garb, a two-piece ensemble of ankle-long loincloth and shoulder-free top that bared her belly button. Its green cloth was veined with black lines designed to mesh seamlessly with the stripes that covered her skin. A tar-coloured shadow shot out of the youma's forehead and landed next to the bed, where its undefined outline turned into Ami's silhouette. For the brief instant before colour returned to the short-haired girl's body, she looked as if she was a red-eyed statue carved from a block of pure darkness.

"Argh!" Feeling a sudden flare of pain around her heart, Ami stumbled forward, bending over and steadying herself against the mattress just before her knees could give out. The bed springs creaked, but she couldn't hear them over the sound of her gurgling cough. The back of her throat tasted coppery, and the dark red droplets sprinkling onto the blanket. *Blood?* After the coughing fit subsided, the dizzy teenager reached out for the wall and pulled herself upright, not trusting her wobbly legs to support her on their own just. The pain had subsided, turning into a dull ache. Panting heavily, Ami dragged the back of her hand over her lips and stared at the resulting red smear on her skin in confusion. Her thoughts raced as she glanced over at the still form on the bed. That pain had

felt familiar. In fact, she had felt exactly the same thing when Zarekos had attacked her during the battle. *Just what did he do to me?* Unbuttoning the collar of her black and gold shirt, she glanced down. Her skin was unbroken, but paler than usual. Relief at not finding a wound flooded Ami, and she closed the shirt, fumbling with the buttons. A speck of green on the bed that she had been too distracted to notice caught her eye. *The youma's hair hasn't gone back to its original yellow?*

Alarmed, Ami looked closer and saw that the creature's face remained almost a mirror image of her own, at least if one disregarded the bristly green hair and the orange skin. *She should have reverted to her original shape once I stopped possessing her!* Blinking to clear her swimming vision, the young Keeper flipped open the Mercury computer and started looking for answers. Why had the pain of Zarekos' spell echoed in her own body? Was it related to the muscle-bound youma still looking like a larger version of herself? Weighing the potential risks of ignoring the situation against the urgency of leading her troops into battle, Ami decided that she needed a second opinion.

White robes swished as Snyder turned away from the patient on the bed and faced Ami, who leaned back in her chair and looked up at him with interest. Answering the unspoken question in her eyes, the redhead shook his head. "I must admit that this is entirely outside of my area of expertise. I have never even heard of magic that could wound a host and also strike the possessing entity. Admittedly, such knowledge would have had no place on the seminary's curriculum." He kneaded his round chin between his fingers as he stared at the red-eyed girl intently. "Nevertheless, it might be wise to purge away any residual dark magic, just in case that a curse yet lingers."

With a nod, Ami gave her permission. "Go ahead." She sat up straighter, blushing faintly when he put his right hand on her sternum, pressing down on the limb with his left. She felt the heat of his palm through the fabric of her shirt and let out a startled hiss when the sensation changed into a chill. She cringed in revulsion as the divine magic coursed through her body, and grabbed the armrests of her chair so tightly that her knuckles turned white. The

urge to lash out at the red-and-white dressed man became nearly overpowering, but Ami gritted her teeth and fought it down. She was shaking from the tenseness in her muscles and sweating heavily when the white light enveloping her finally died down after what had felt like an eternity. In reality, no more than five heartbeats could have passed.

"Are you all right?" The short man took a step back and cocked his head, raising his eyebrows at the sight of the Keeper shivering as if she was freezing.

"I'm fine, thanks," Ami breathed. "Contact with light magic just feels really bad for me," she explained, sounding sad. "Could you do the same for the youma over there, please? Don't worry, I'll use my power to hold her down so she won't get violent."

"Very well. We really ought to find a name for her," Snyder commented while he plodded over to the motionless body. "Always referring to her as 'the unknown youma' is becoming tiresome."

Ami looked at the resting figure. "Um. Tiger, perhaps?" Given the stripes and orange skin, the name suggested itself, even if there was nothing feline about the muscular youma.

"That will do." Snyder brushed through his neat bowl cut before reaching for the youma. Even with his body blocking Ami's view, she wanted to look away from the pristine white glow that flared up behind him. "You described the blood that Zarekos drew from you as purple, correct?" Snyder asked, his back facing Ami as he continued his ministrations.

"Yes."

"Well, that is strange," the acolyte said. "It has come to my attention that Tiger's blood is blue. Which means..."

"Red plus blue," Ami continued his sentence. "Zarekos somehow stole blood from both of us at the same time. How is that even possible?"

"I wouldn't be able to tell you. However, did I understand you right?

He stole blood from you?" Snyder looked over his shoulder, a frown marring his face.

"Well, the fight was really chaotic with the lights flashing and water spraying everywhere, but I think the droplets flew off toward him," Ami explained.

The priest in training let out a sigh. "Unfortunate. It's not impossible that he knows enough blood magic to use it against you. However, I am hazy on the details and suspect that your libraries know more about this subject than I do."

"Oh." Now that was most unwelcome news, and Ami lowered her head as she contemplated the implications. She sprang to her feet. "I'll delegate looking into that to one of the warlocks. For now, I have to lead my troops! This makes beating him as fast as possible even more urgent!"

"Ahem, are you sure you want to go out like that?" Snyder's nasal voice sounded dubious, as the way the slender girl was swaying wasn't filling him with confidence. "It is my professional opinion as a healer that you should sit this one out."

The black-clad girl fell silent for long moment, considering the leaden feeling in her limbs. "Hmm, I suppose I don't *have* to be with my squad until they reach the target. I'll use that time to recover, but I need to supervise the actual assault. This is too good an opportunity to pass up."

Three energetic knocks against the oaken wood of Ami's bedroom door roused her from her slumber. She sat up and rubbed her eyes, feeling as if she had closed them only moments before.

"Mercury, I need you in the command centre. I think there's something you should see." Cathy's voice came from the other side of the closed door, muffled by the thick oaken wood.

Stifling a yawn, Ami slipped out from underneath the covers. "All right, I'll be over there in a minute," she called, gesturing with her

left. Cloth rustled as her black trousers with gold adornments came sailing into her open grasp, followed by a matching shirt. Feeling presentable enough given the circumstances, Ami transported herself into the command centre without fanfare. The few warlocks who noticed her arrival murmured a polite greeting and resumed their work. She could see Jered paint markings onto the large map resting on the central table, his pale green tunic standing out brightly in the spotlight.

"Ah, there you are," Cathy said, striding through the double row of occupied pilot capsules and past the blue-haired girl, joining her wavy-haired boyfriend next to the map. She motioned Ami to come closer. Addressing the two goblins waiting nearby, she ordered "You! Show us the situation as it was an hour ago!" The greenskins saluted and started turning cranks protruding from two rolls that had been affixed to the opposing edges of the table. The transparent sheet spanned between them moved, and the red dots jotted down on it crept over the painted landscape. As the current drawings overlaid over the map were rolled up, older ones replaced them, showing notes that had been taken earlier. "Stop, that's the one. Mercury, what do you think of this?"

It was immediately obvious to Ami that the number of red dots had increased relative to the previous state, and she frowned. "Since I find it a bit hard to believe that we eliminated a fourth of the known enemy troops while I slept, this means they are moving?"

"That's what I thought, too" Cathy confirmed. "The ghost village over there? Empty. So is this one. And that over there, too." The tall blonde's finger stabbed down at the offending map squares. "Something's up."

"They are reinforcing the surrounding dungeon hearts, then?" Ami asked, jumping to the obvious conclusion.

"If they are, they aren't taking the direct route," Cathy said. "At least, the warlocks haven't spotted them moving down any of the obvious paths, and the target dungeons remain empty."

"Maybe they took the opportunity to get the hell out of there now that Zarekos isn't looking over their shoulder any more?" Jered

suggested.

"That's not in their nature," the blonde disagreed, shaking her head. "If they are migrating, then they have orders."

"Please show the current situation," Ami demanded. The goblins turned their cranks, and her eyes filled with worry as she watched the update slide across the table's surface. From time to time, she tapped a few keys on the keyboard of her computer. When she looked up from her work, her expression was grim. "I just correlated the disappearances with the paths our troops are taking. The enemies are only disappearing from locations that none of the teams can see!"

Cathy slammed her fist in her palm. "So they don't want us to know what they are up to? That screams 'ambush' to me!"

"Its worse than that," Ami said, feeling her hackles rise. "They are reacting to our actions. That means they aren't just acting out a pre-planned set of moves!"

"All right. So there may be a few commanders out there giving orders. We can deal with that," the female warrior said confidently. "Zarekos would just move troops in from other parts of the continent and not give us a chance to notice his preparations at all."

"Maybe not. Keepers can transport something instantly, but picking it up and dropping it off still takes a small amount of time. When moving large numbers of troops, it can be faster to just send them on their own if the distance is short enough. Especially if they can fly," Ami pointed out.

"It's a good thing he's banished, then. Ghosts may be fast, but I doubt they are as fast as your reaperbots. Man, those buckets can run." Jered snickered. "I wonder how Marda keeps up with them."

Ami concentrated briefly, and an image of the troll clinging to the back of one of the metallic behemoths popped into her mind. She had her legs wrapped around its waist and was clutching the horns like handles, sounding like a rattle as her chainmail jingled with each rapid bound. "Piggyback ride."

"That can't be comfortable," the wavy-haired man said with a pleased smile. "In any case, our warriors should be able to get to the targets before the defenders do, so all is fine."

"Unless enemies teleport in and slow them down," Cathy retorted.

"All of the groups can handle a bunch of bloodsuckers. It's not as if the lot of them knew where to attack without their Keeper to guide them." Jered remained unconcerned. "There's no reason for you to go pale like that," he continued, winking at Ami.

The teenager gulped, cursing her imagination that conjured up images of Jadeite being torn apart by a savage flock of vampires that had appeared out of nowhere. She banished the pictures by looking back at the map, tracking the progress her teams had made during the last five hours. So far things were looking well. All four groups should reach their destinations within the next one to two hours if the automatons kept advancing at their current pace, which was about that of a sprinting human. That *should* be fast enough to outrun the undead pursuers.

"Big bad vampire not have servant Keepers to move stuff for him?" one of the goblins piped up. He hopped from one leg to the other in excitement when he noticed that all three bigwigs were staring at him now.

Cathy and Jered exchanged a horrified glance. "Oh crap!"

Ami remained calm though, and even directed a small smile at the creature. "No, subordinate Keepers don't work that w-"

"Mercury, skeletons are raining down on us from the sky!" Jadeite's voice suddenly popped into her mind. To her great irritation, he sounded more indignant about the inadequacy of the attack than alarmed. *"Ack! Vampire!"*

"WHAT? That shouldn't be- GET OUT OF THERE! Without offering an explanation, she disappeared within a swirl of snowflakes. Not that she needed to give one, as the warlocks in charge of each group started shouting about enemies popping up from everywhere.

A trap! My troops are too far away from my dungeon heart to pull them back! Ami realised as she reappeared in a flash of blue. Snowflakes drifted past her boots, continuing their journey down to the Avatar Islands far below while she kept hovering in the sky. She would save them anyway! By teleporting closer - something she wouldn't have been able to pull off without the teleport spell Jadeite had taught her, given that Zarekos had claimed the entire continent - she brought her troops into her personal zone of influence, which partially overlapped with that of the dungeon heart. With that kind of range extension, she could deposit them safely back on the ship, despite the vampire lord's machinations. *How can he be back already?*

Knowing that Jadeite could teleport out on his own, Ami reached out with her mind, checking on Marda first. She found the armoured troll blurring across a field of moving skeletons and shattered bones, exchanging blindingly fast blows with a pair of red-robed vampires. The combatants hopped and jumped across the battlefield, using rocks and the occasional reaperbot as steppingstones for their high-speed acrobatics. In the background, a group of flying ghosts was using grappling hooks to reel a flailing automaton up into the sky. One of the vampires lost his head to a golf-club-like swing of Marda's hammer just as Ami ripped the troll leader away from the fight. In her haste, she didn't aim for a particular landing location, nor did she ensure a soft landing. The creature flipped over twice before skidding into a wall. Even unmoving, her outline remained blurry.

Ami was already reaching for Mareki when she felt her veins turn to ice and her lungs lock up. The numbing sensation emanated from several hand-sized spots on her back, shoulder, and legs that felt as if burning fingers were sliding through her flesh. *Invisible ghosts,* she realised as she teleported away with a supreme effort of will, barely able to keep her eyes open. Seeing the parched ground rush for her and feeling the wind blow her bangs back, she realised that she had blacked out for a moment. She had no doubt that only her sailor senshi constitution had allowed her to survive that sneak attack. She controlled her fall just in time to prevent smashing into the rocks at full speed, but was too weak to avoid the impact altogether. Rolling over the ground like a crash test dummy ejected from a car window, she was almost glad for the numbness lingering after the attack of

the life-draining spectres. Feeling dizzy, she tried to remember what she had come here to do. Oh, yes, Mareki. Lying on her back and looking at the spiralling bands of fiery clouds, she spotted something that looked like a bat out of hell coming right at her. The shapes multiplied as the sky seemed to spit out more. Her half-lidded eyes flew open. *Vampires! MOVE!*

Shaken by the sight of claw-like fingernails taking up her entire field of vision, Ami flashed into existence at a hidden spot a few kilometres away, still prone. Right. Mareki. She hurled the youma through space, going for speed over precision. Her eyes widened as a shadow fell over her. Already teleporting, she could hear claws cut the air as they whistled toward where she had been. *How do they keep finding me so fast?* Battered, bloody, and with her outfit in tatters, she appeared back in her command centre, in no state to extract the reaperbots too. Ignoring the alarmed shouts of her employees, she focused on watching the battle as she dropped to her knees. In about the time it took Cathy to rush over and catch her, too many vampires to count descended upon her remaining automatons and tore them to scraps, despite their spirited resistence. She could hear the goblins in their capsules protest loudly at the unfairness of it all. It was then that she realised that the trap had been meant for her, not for her forces. As soon as she had escaped, the enemy had crushed the bait with his full might.

That night, when the sun had set and only the faint light of the burning clouds above painted the surface of the ocean a dim red, banks of smooth, rolling fog poured down the cliffs. Like lava, they glowed from within as they moved over the water, setting it ablaze with green and yellow flame where they passed. Unperturbed by the perpetual storm surrounding the small iceberg off the coast, the spectral clouds stalked forward, moving against the wind total silence. The inhabitants of the floating fortress would soon learn what the missing ghosts were up to.

Damage Control

Originally on 2010-07-09T01:28:00

Ami sat on the throne in the back of her command centre, wrapped in a warm blanket. The unoccupied goblin capsules framing the central path gaped like open sarcophagi, and with only three warlocks and her inner circle present, the vast chamber felt empty. A blurry figure was approaching, reminding her of a white-stemmed mushroom with a red cap. With a supreme effort of will, she raised eyebrows that felt as heavy as lead and focused properly. The stem of the mushroom became the white part of Snyder's robe, the red cap the stole draped over his upper body and shoulders.

"Here, drink this."

Ami squinted at the steaming cup being shoved in her face and let out a soft whimper. "Another one? But-"

"Drink it. This tea is proven to get survivors of ghost attacks back on their feet in no time." His tone mellowed a bit as he took in her expression. "Please do it, even if you are feeling lethargic. I know you probably want nothing more than to curl up in your bed and sleep for a week right now." He looked up and frowned at the fuku-clad blonde standing behind the throne. "And Cathy, that pillow is *not helping*."

"She shouldn't even be here in her condition! She may as well sit comfortably," the fuku-clad woman replied as she stuffed the large cushion into the gap between Mercury's body and the backrest of the throne.

Ami secretly agreed with the red-haired healer because she felt herself getting sleepier by the minute. However, her reluctance to drink the warm liquid was not due to the heaviness of her limbs. Her stomach already felt bloated from all the previous cups, and she could hear it slosh around when she shifted her weight. With a slowness that had nothing to do with her state of health, she reached for the proffered cup. The tea *did* seem to help, after all.

Initially, her skin had glittered as if it has been dusted with diamond where the ghost's skeletal hands had touched her. Thanks to the tea, the disturbing handprints were slowly fading away, despite having resisted her necromantic healing spells. She had already treated the bruises and scrapes she had carried away from her recent plunge, but couldn't do anything to get rid of the lingering coldness in her bones. Ami braved another sip, grimacing at the bitter taste. If it kept her awake, she was willing to deal with it. There were questions that needed to be addressed sooner rather than later. She put the cup down and looked around.

"I need to know how the enemy could keep tracking me even after I teleported, and what I can do about it. Does anyone have any ideas?"

A grey-bearded warlock turned away from the scrying window set into the wall and raised his hand. "I have a theory, my Lady. If I may ask a question first?"

Ami nodded. "Yes, go ahead."

"Is it possible that Zarekos has obtained a personal item or a piece of your body, such as hair, during your battle? If not, my theory is inapplicable," the wizard said.

"Yes, he did take some of my blood, even if it was mixed with the youma's."

The warlock stroked the end of his bushy moustache. "Blood would work. Blood would work very well indeed. I believe he may have forged an arcane link through the use of sympathetic magic, as described in Ribald's 'Harmonics and Exsanguination'. A most enlightening read, I might add. Your library does hold a copy, in case you want to check it out yourself. I did find the illustrations very enlightening, even though the prose was-"

"Get to the point you meandering old fool!" Marda, sitting on one of the goblin capsules, raised her hand as if to ward off the flood of words coming from the wrinkly man's mouth. "We aren't here to listen to your ramblings! What does it do, and how can it be stopped?"

"Philistine," the warlock muttered, shooting the troll a poisonous glance. "In any case, this would enable him to track where the rest of Lady Mercury's blood is. One would have to destroy the sample he used as a focus of his ritual to sunder the connection." He rolled his, eyes skywards, thinking. "Well, pumping out all of her blood would work too, of course, but... anyway, there is a caveat. Given the intricately-linked nature of Keepers and their hearts, the magical signature of her territory should be sufficiently close to her own to mask her precise location, for what it is worth."

"So I blend in with my surroundings as long as I stay here," Ami deduced. "All right, that is helpful." She closed her eyes and fell still, as if she had dozed off. Just as Cathy reached out to gently shake the blue-haired girl's arm, her eyes flew open, burning a bright red as they focused on the warlock. "If Zarekos can trace my blood with his sample, I should be able to locate his sample using my own blood. I won't allow him to keep it, whether or not that was what he was using to find me! Please prepare a set of instructions on how to perform this spell for me immediately!"

"A-as you wish, my Keeper." He bowed deeply, sweeping the floor with the tip of his beard. "If it isn't too much trouble, I humbly request to be deposited in the library."

The wood of the chair the man had just occupied creaked as his weight vanished along with his body into thin air. Ami could transport her underlings with no physical effort and only had to briefly focus her will - something that was easy even while she was recovering.

Marda made a grumbling noise in the back of her throat that sounded like approval. "Turn the old bat's trick back on himself. I like it."

The brown-haired man who had so far kept in the background, leaning against the map table with a neutral expression, said "With some luck, this could even lead us directly to his main hideout, or at least to some place that isn't just an empty dungeon full of traps!"

"Since when is luck on our side?" his girlfriend muttered from behind Ami's seat.

"Let's hope it is this time," Ami said, and a faint smile played around her lips. It disappeared with her next statement. "However, there is still more to do. I need to see the four locations where our forces were ambushed!"

Acting on the implicit command, the two remaining warlocks focused on the upright divining pools, mumbling a repetitive sequence of short syllables. Behind the glass windows, the water swirled and glowed, its colours darkening into the black and red tones of the nearby continent's devastated landscape.

Pale skeletons crawled like ants over the battlefield, dragging huge pieces of scrap metal toward a pair of black-cloaked vampires. Maggot-like fingers accepted each part, twisting and turning the heavy pieces as if they weighted no more than feathers. Once inspected, most parts were discarded onto a growing pile of useless debris that towered like a mound of corpses in the centre of the battlefield. Others were handed to the first vampire's partner, who peeled the armour away like tinfoil. When his arms emerged from the wreckage, Ami could spot the distinctive glitter of gold.

"I suppose them not noticing the fuel was too much to hope for," Cathy sighed. "We ought to do something about that." She glared at the small pile of precious metal that was building up at the enemy's feet, as if she could will it to go away. Surprisingly, it disappeared, no doubt gone directly into Zarekos' coffers.

Ami nodded. "We can't really stop them, but perhaps we can slow them down. Jadeite!"

"Yes?" The dark general, who was sitting on thin air rather than using one of the coffin-shaped pilot capsules as a bench, drifted closer.

Ami got up, brushing off the blanket, and stood on wobbly legs. Instead of her battered Keeper outfit, she was wearing her original senshi uniform. "I need you to teleport me around while I attack the salvage operations."

"What? You can barely walk!You can't go out in your condition, especially not if the enemy Keeper can immediately find you!" Cathy

put her arms akimbo, stepping in front of the teenager as if to bar her path.

"Jadeite will be doing most of the work. We'll not stay long enough for Zarekos to strike at me. Just a quick hit and run! Now, we will go here first, then here..." Ami pointed out the different spots on the map, glancing at the scrying devices to plan her assault. "Jadeite, can you handle four rapid succession teleports with a passenger?"

"Of course," the curly haired dark general nodded, stepping closer. "I am ready to go as soon as you command."

Ami could feel her cheeks heat up when he put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her closer. *It's all completely professional,* she reminded herself as her heart rate picked up. "R-Right. On my mark. Three. Two. One. Go!"

Ami and Jadeite shimmered into existence as a single speck of dark violet light that solidified into their shapes in less time than it took her to blink. Immediately, she could feel the parched, ash-laden air brush over her skin and smell the stench of sulphur. Below, the rattle of metal striking metal echoed across the rocks as the undead continued their triage.

"Shabonspray!" In Ami's haste to blurt out the spell, she nearly struck Jadeite in the face with her flailing arm motions. The blonde ducked his head and let out a startled grunt as he adjusted his grip around the smaller girl's waist and shoulders. Before the bubbles shooting from Ami's fingers could expand into a proper fog bank, she compressed them, turning them into her gurgling Keeper hand. Alerted by the blue light flickering across the landscape, the two vampires darted apart even before they could hear the whistle of the liquid hand that was streaking toward them. Transparent fingers as thick as their legs dug into the sooty soil, which quaked from the violence of the impact. As the two pale creatures glided through the air toward their attackers, trailed by fluttering cloaks, Ami shouted "Out!" and both she and Jadeite disappeared with his signature effect of black lines shooting upward. The vampires stopped, turning around as they heard a loud crunching noise from behind. The sight

of the liquid fist crushing their pile of recovered gold between its fingers and disappearing with it made their dead eyes widen. Both gulped. Zarekos wouldn't like this.

"Shabon Spray Freezing!" hovering in the uncomfortably hot updraught above a seething river of lava, Ami directed her spell straight down, rather than at the skeletons and ghosts labouring at their shore. The creatures, undaunted by their close proximity to the fiery stream, turned as one and stared up at her with hollow eyes that looked like bottomless pits in the orange light. "Out, now!" Ami shouted, feeling her vision swim from forcing a quick Shabon Spray Freezing. *That was easier when I was in the youma body,* her thoughts strayed. Jadeite tensed in surprise at her command - they hadn't even attacked yet - but complied. The scintillating shot of ice and water descended toward the plates of condensing rock drifting on the surface of the roaring lava. It plunged through the molten surface and flash-vaporised from the furnace-like heat. The cloud of pressurised steam expanded with a howl, pushing a fountaining wall of lava outward as it violently made more room. Not understanding what was going on, the skeletons were caught by the hip-high wave of red-hot stone that spilled over the shore. The vampire overseers cleared the danger zone easily enough by flying straight up, weaving around flying globs of molten rock and abandoning their servants to their fate. They gnashed their elongated teeth in anger when they looked down and realised that their salvage was disappearing underneath small puddles of cooling lava.

Jadeite could feel Mercury slump against him, relying on him to keep her aloft. Nevertheless, as soon as they arrived at their third destination, he could feel his hackles rise when the soft body he was carrying crackled with static energy. Mercury's blue bangs moved independently of the breeze, and he could feel the power she was summoning from her dungeon heart. Which made sense, as there was no convenient natural hazard she could exploit. With a bang and a flash that hurt and blinded eyes used to the twilight, an enormous fireball blossomed amidst the field of debris, scattering scrap and gold far over the landscape. "To the final location," Ami

demanded, red eyes burning brightly.

Zarekos didn't have to be a genius to figure out what Mercury was doing. When she and Jadeite appeared over the group of labouring skeletons, the air was crawling with ghosts that looked like softly glowing clouds. Worse, frayed shadows patrolled the airspace, resembling giant bats with their fluttering robes.

"Shabo- ugh!" Inertia drove Jadeite's forearm into Ami's stomach when he suddenly swerved backwards, driving the breath out of her lungs. Black and red bolts of power flashed past where the two of them had just been as some of the vampires demonstrated their mastery of the arcane arts. A barrage of magical projectiles slammed into the dark general's shield, sending ripples across the bluish field of force.

"Hurry," the blond hissed through clenched teeth, his eyes going wide as black and red blurs closed in from all directions.

"Yes, I-" Ami's heart skipped a beat when a pale figure appeared directly behind them, *within* Jadeite's shield bubble. Had she not been in his arms and looking over his shoulders, neither of them would have seen the well-dressed vampire appear. The eye slits that shone red like windows to hell removed any uncertainty about Zarekos still being banished or not. The vampire lord's hands were already moving, two clawed blurs that shot toward his enemies. With a speed born of desperation, Ami made a grab for the incoming wrists. Even with both of her arms slung around Jadeite in a hug-like hold and her hands already on his back, she was too late to get a grip on the vampire's limbs, and had to settle for striking at the inside of his arms, forcing them apart. In hindsight, this was the better course of action. She would have never been able to oppose the vampire's raw strength directly. The deflected blows whistled past Jadeite's shoulders on both sides, and Ami could feel Zarekos' carrion-smelling breath on her skin as she came face to face with the enemy Keeper. Wide-eyed, she hurled Jadeite and herself through space, fleeing toward her dungeon. Zarekos' arms closed like those of a praying mantis in a swipe that would have bisected his enemies if they had still been there.

The unannounced and hasty transport through space caught Jadeite unaware, and the grey-clad general stumbled as he arrived in the command centre. Half-spinning from the enforced teleportation, and with Mercury's weight clinging to him, he stood no chance of regaining his footing. He ended up on his back, with Mercury's warm body draped over him. Ami blinked, noted the dazed look in his steel-blue eyes, and realised with a start how close their faces were. *Just a little closer, and-*

"You have got to work on your landings, Keeper," Marda growled from her perch on the goblin capsule. "I got more bruises from your extrication than from the entire battle against the vampires," the troll continued. If she had injuries, then they were invisible underneath her chainmail.

Startled, Ami jumped and scrambled to get off of the prone general. "Jadeite! Are you all right?" she asked, trying to ignore her burning ears as she helped him to his feet.

"Fine," the curly-haired blond said, patting the dust of off his uniform.

Amy reluctantly tore her gaze away from the dark general and turned toward Marda, inclining her head. "I apologise for any inconveniences with the landing, but I was in a hurry," she explained, hoping the armoured troll would let the issue go.

"We saw everything, even your confrontation with Zarekos," Catyh interrupted, gesturing toward the divining windows. "Damn, I'm starting to see why the other Keepers consider it too much trouble to deal with him. Still, you managed to slow down his recovery of the gold and even managed to get some back! It's a shame you couldn't do anything at that fourth site."

"Actually," Ami said, her expression brightening considerably as she pulled something out of her left glove and held it up for everyone to see. "I managed to throw the other half of this into the gold pile before Zarekos attacked.

"What's that?" Jered approached, his nose twitching as he picked up

the smell. "Half a garlic clove? How is that going to help? The bloodsuckers can't even smell it."

"Exactly!" Ami smiled. "I needed something to mark the gold, and the vampires would have sniffed out any blood immediately. But plant juice?"

"Wait, you want to use the blood-tracking spell on plant juice?" The wavy-haired man asked with a snort. "Plant juice. Plant blood? Well, it's worth a try. If that works, you might just be the first person to successfully employ garlic against vampires."

"Anyway," Ami continued, more sombre now that the adrenaline was wearing off, "what I really want to know is how Zarekos managed to return from his banishment so quickly."

"That's simple enough to find out," Jadeite said, drawing surprised looks from the others. "Just keep your minions scrying on him while you destroy another dungeon heart." The dark general smirked, crossing his arms.

"Well said, oh general," Marda mocked. "Simple indeed."

Jered produced a ledger from somewhere within his tunic. "Let's delay further attacks until we know exactly how much this setback cost-" A bell started ringing, and he looked around, searching for the source of the noise in confusion. "What's that?"

"The Captain on the bridge must have spotted something," Ami said, grimacing. She had just been about to settle onto her throne and rest her legs. "I'll go check it out."

Last edited: Sep 9, 2016

Retaliation

Originally on 2010-07-13T22:51:00

"What is going on, Captain?" Ami asked as soon as she had appeared on the bridge of her iceberg, addressing the short goblin pressing his face against the window and tugging at a string. The creature squeaked in surprise, and the back of his head jerked, making his ill-fitting cap slide to the side.

"Ow!" With a ripping noise, the captain's nose came loose from the ice it had been stuck to, and he whirled around. Saluting with one hand and rubbing the sore skin on his face with the other, he shouted "Keeper! Water glowing! Look! Look! Over there!"

"You can stop sounding the alarm now," Ami said softly as she joined the creature in front of the wall of metre-thick, transparent ice that served as the window. The goblin let the rope slide from his grasp, and the noise of a bell ringing in the distance abated. The tired girl turned into the direction that the goblin was pointing at and peered through the raindrops that the storm was whipping against the screen. On the horizon, the continent appeared like a black, uneven band that separated the sea from the spiralling clouds. Even now, at the onset of night, the bands of red flickering deep within the clouds made the sky look as if it was trapped in a perpetual sunset. More alarming was the thin band of white fog that flowed down the hills and onto the coast. Like a waterfall of glowing milk, it spilled into the sea, drifting on the tides like an oil carpet. The phenomenon crept forward, defying both the storm and the water currents on its silent journey. *It's coming here,* Ami realised as she watched the strange glow glitter on the waves.

Lightning flashed, briefly banishing Ami's pale reflection in the ice. In the glare, she didn't even need her visor to determine the true nature of the incoming mass. Like individual snowflakes forming an avalanche, hundreds - *no, there have to be thousands* - of ghosts swarmed across the water, each one surrounded by a pale nimbus. The sight of their inexorable advance made Ami's blood run cold.

"You did well to call me," she blurted out, making the goblin jump in joy at being praised. A shudder went through the girl's weary muscles, and her left knee buckled. She steadied herself against the ice as she staggered forward. *I can't fight like this. Maybe..* The short-haired girl turned to the goblin, eyes burning bright red. With one knee on the ground her face was level with his. "I will have to borrow your body for a while, please don't be afraid." She leaned forward, extending her arms as if to embrace the suddenly nervous Captain. As her arms wrapped around him, they were already dark shadows and sank through his green skin and into his body. A black aura crackled around the triangular-eared creature as Ami's form melded into his own. He straightened, standing more upright than before, and his large, round eyes glowed red.

Ami's throne was too large for the short body she was wearing, but that was the last thought on her mind right now. Quickly, her throne room filled with creatures that looked confused at appearing with no warning in the great, mirror-floored hall. Most had not gone to sleep yet after the exciting operations of the day, but one of the goblins arrived still clutching a pillow. A warlock froze in surprise at the sudden disappearance of his bowl of soup, his arm still holding a spoon extended. Recognising the pillar-framed hall of carved ice, he slowly turned toward the throne as more of his colleagues appeared around him in rapid succession. The sight of the lanky green figure occupying the regal, high-backed seat wrought in the semblance of a Mercury symbol was unexpected, but a second glance at the goblin's red-glowing eyes convinced them that he had a right to be there. Whispers sounded through the room, echoing underneath the high ceiling as the occupants wondered why the Keeper was summoning all of them here and why she had chosen such an undignified form.

Ami's gaze darted left and right over the assembled masses. Had she forgotten anyone? She had sorted her employees according to size, with the short goblins in the front row and the trolls behind them. Their slouching posture allowed the warlocks standing in the back a good view of the throne, even if the slick-bearded mage standing behind Marda had to stand on tiptoes to see over the

armoured troll's head. Cathy, Jadeite, Jered, and Snyder were an exception to the rule and stood closest to Ami's throne, while Marda remained with her own troops. Ami wondered where Mareki had gone before spotting her floating between the pillars on the left side of the room, keeping in a shadow that looked deeper than the rest. *Umbra*, the young Keeper thought, recognising the dimming effect that the stealth-based youma had on the illumination. *I guess even youma like to keep each other company. I'll have to ask for her report when time is less of an issue.* Tserk, the tentacle monster, was lurking underneath, tracking the lizard-tailed creature with fully half of its large number of eyes. Aside from Tiger, who was too unstable to take or comprehend orders, everyone was here, directing curious glances at her. All the attention made her want to sink into the ground, but she shook the feeling off. "Everyone, the ship is about to be attacked!" she shouted, rising and standing on the seat of her throne to make more of an impression. "A flood of Zarekos' ghosts is crossing the ocean, and I need all of you to prepare for battle at once!"

The volume of the muttering increased, and Ami could *smell* the excitement and apprehension of the crowd. She hadn't known goblin noses were that sensitive.

"What would you have us do, Keeper?" Erasmus, the purple-robed warlock she was most familiar with, asked.

"My men shall be guarding the main entrance," Marda spoke up before Ami could answer, her rough voice cutting through the background noise.

"Yes, you have the most experience fighting this kind of enemy." The possessed goblin nodded, and Ami's vision went black when the captain's hat she was wearing slid down over her eyes from the movement. She resolved to keep her replies verbal from now on. While she readjusted it, Marda barked orders, and the hunch-backed trolls jogged toward the exit, forcing the warlocks to jump aside to let the warriors pass. The robed spellcasters were next on Ami's list. "Warlocks, I need ten of you to return to the command centre and scry on Zarekos. Locate him if possible. If not, keep an eye on him to see if you can't deduce his plans from his surroundings and actions. You others, assist the trolls and keep

them alive. Your magic will be ineffective when used directly on the ghosts, so each of you will have a squad of goblins assigned to keep you safe. Jered, you assign the squads and leaders. Six goblins to a team."

The wavy-haired man inclined his head in response and marched toward the creatures, who started shoving each other out of the way in their eagerness to get to the front of the group in order to be named a leader. Jered strode past them at a brisk pace, waving for them to follow him. "Come along. Let's follow the warlocks!" The green crowd trailed after him, reminding Ami of a file of unruly schoolchildren. Soon enough, their shouts and mangled grammar retreated to the corridors and disappeared into the distance.

So far, so good. Ami watched her troops, her thoughts racing as her mind came up with one battle plan after the other. She turned to the nearby blonde wearing a breastplate over her senshi uniform. "Cathy, take the rest of the goblin pilots and have them pilot our remaining automatons. Assign shifts, this battle may turn into a siege and last a long time."

"Of course." The female soldier turned to follow the others, but hesitated. Running in place, she said "If you don't mind me asking, what will you be doing during the battle? You aren't going to be at the front lines for this, right? It's your duty to sit in the safest spot you can find and make support everyone else."

"I agree with the human," Marda said, pointing her thumb at the scar-faced woman. "This is a battle on your own territory. There is nothing you can do in person that you can't do more effectively from a remote, unassailable position. Stop thinking like a hero and start thinking like a general!"

Ami winced inwardly. Taking the fight to the enemy was *exactly* what her senshi instincts were screaming at her to do. But her advisers had a point. "Very well, I shall remain in the command centre," she conceded. With the room devoid of regular employees now, she addressed Jadeite. "See what you can do to fend the ghosts off with your magic, but don't go outside! Have the youma assist you!"

That left Snyder, who was fidgeting and looking at her nervously, as

if he was expecting to be deployed at the front. Ami smiled to reassure the redhead. "Don't worry, I won't ask you to use your warding skills at the entrance," she said. Snyder's too-rigid posture relaxed. A faint blush crept onto his cheeks, but he did not try to excuse his lack of courage. "I'll need you in the infirmary," Ami continued. "Please stand ready to treat any wounded warriors whom I move there. I hope your services won't be needed at all, but..."

"Ah, yes, I understand perfectly. Hope for the best, prepare for the worst. I must say that I have never healed trolls before. I am sure it will be a most fascinating experience." The red-and-white robed man's expression was sour, belying the strained cheerfulness of his voice. "Well, see you after this is over."

The wave of floating ghosts rose up from the ocean's surface, ready to break over the iceberg. Like a kraken, the main force of the assault extended three separate tendrils that wrapped around the gigantic vessel. Moaning ghosts streamed through the air, bellowing their anger into the storm. Ami didn't even need her night vision to observe this, as the ice spikes dotting the surface of her dungeon reflected the greenish light of the spectres at a thousand different angles, turning night to day. The entire iceberg seemed ablaze with the vengeful spirits' glow. *St. Elmo's fire?* Ami wondered when the huge windmills lining the deck blazed like torches. *No, it's something different,* she realised in horror as she watched the huge blue flames clinging to the metal structures flutter nearly horizontally in the breeze. Excitement and adrenaline made her host's heart flutter and her breath speed up, and she could feel the body step from one foot to the other on its own. *But how do they intend to get in?* Ghostly claws scratched over the hatch covering the entrance, finding no purchase on the blank steel. It required an entire team of strong creatures to lift even when it wasn't locked, and pulling it open from outside without getting a proper grip on it was all but impossible. Likewise, the surface of the glacier had been fortified into something stronger than mere ice by the power of the dungeon heart and the diligent, if reluctant, labour of her goblin force. Where fortifying claimed territory was concerned, the lack of imps was making itself painfully felt. There was only so much rats could do. Pulling her

attention away from the screeches of fingernails over metal, she looked at her windmills. Ghosts covered the tall towers like a shell of angry clams, tugging and pushing at the structures that shook and bent under the stress. A glob of seawater turned into Ami's Keeper hand and batted at the semi-transparent attackers like a man trying to fend off ants crawling up his legs. Crushed ghosts dissipated under the blows, but her efforts were in vain. With a horrible groan, audible even over the raging storm, the first of the buildings broke in half. The three blades spinning at its top came loose, slashing through the air like an oversized shuriken and gouging the ice as they rolled across the until they crashed into the base of the next tower. A second mill followed the first's example even before noise of the debris sliding off the side of the iceberg had subsided.

Sighing, Ami resigned herself to replacing the destroyed power generators once the battle was over. Their loss was irritating, but not dangerous. It wasn't as if the ghosts could creep inside through the power lines. Rather than defending what was already lost, the teenager focused on destroying the attackers more efficiently. Her watery hand flashed across the sky, spreading inhumanly long fingers to sweep the ghosts in its path out of the air. Weightless, barely corporal wisps of ectoplasm burst into evaporating streamers as the hand moved through them. Neither ghosts nor rain drops survived their collisions with the Keeper hand, but there were always more to take their place. Ami did not feel as if she was making any progress, despite destroying four or five ghosts with each sweeping pass. What was Zarekos planning? He couldn't be content with just letting her destroy his minions with no danger to herself. It made no sense! The feeling of unease in the back of the young Keeper's mind grew with each passing moment.

"Keeper, you should see this!" a warlock shouted, turning to the goblin in the command chair whose red-glowing eyes had glazed over. They cleared as Ami focused her attention onto the indicated screen, where a familiar figure was up to no good.

Zarekos stood in the exact centre of an octagonal, vaulted chamber and directed a well-practised sneer at the ground. Immediately, the blanket of dust around his feet peeled back, billowing up in an

expanding circle as a strong gust of wind blew it away. The spineless worms that were his thralls choked and mewled in disgust as the grey dirt clouds engulfed them, but he tuned out their unworthy noises. Instead, he inspected the neat grooves of the pentagram that the past decade's parting dust had revealed. Satisfied with the state of the symbol that had been etched with painstaking precision into the smoothed brass disc covering the floor, he beckoned forth two servants with the index finger of his left hand. Two black-clad females stepped out of the indistinct mass of craven bloodsuckers lurking in the shadows and approached, carrying a folded-up garment between them. Meanwhile, the ritual chamber brightened as other vampires flowed around the eight granite pillars supporting the ceiling, lighting the candles spiralling up the sides of the round columns.

Paying no attention to the preparations, the vampire lord spread his arms, and the grooves in the ground lit up with a harsh red light. Mirages and illusions fluttered around him, showing him glances of the interior of his enemy's frozen dungeon. His dreadful thoughts darkened at the sight of the wicked girl's floating abode drifting in the stormy sea. Such gall, to strike at him not once, but twice! Familiar fury bubbled up in the red-eyed monster's mind at the memories of the dungeon heart he had lost to her perfidious attack. That part of his holdings was now a deep wound in the flawless defences of his realm, one it would bear forever since his coffers lacked the coin to see to its removal. What was it that the hateful harridan in her fortress of frozen water desired? Whatever dire schemes her mind was concocting were a riddle to him. The burning coals that were the bald vampire's eyes narrowed as he reflected on the battle that had cost him so much. Had his heart still been beating, it would have skipped a beat the moment he first laid sight upon the horned silhouettes in the shape of the fiends most foul attacking. But no, they were just another kind of puppet that the master puppeteer had concocted. More powerful for certain than the ambulant monuments to her own vanity that she had deployed on her ill-fated first incursion, indeed, but they were merely pale imitations of the real thing. It was fitting, in a way, that a Keeper who opted to look like a little girl would enjoy playing with dolls so much, infuriating as their lack of vitae might be. Truth be told, it had been most courteous of her to fill their repellent shells with the soft and glimmering precious

metal that fuelled the flames of magic, adding financial reward to the pure and undiluted joy of destruction meted out without restraint. Just for that, he might show her a mercy she did not deserve and turn her into one of his thralls. After she had spent the rest of her natural lifespan atoning for her sins by nurturing him with the delicious nectar that raced through her veins, of course.

Zarekos dismissed the pleasant fantasy - which wouldn't remain a daydream for long, if he had his way. The two female vampires stepped into the corona of red light surrounding him. Both knelt and draped a red cape covered in elaborate silver runes around his shoulders. Their lord closed its golden clasp fashioned in the shape of an eye, exulting in the feel of the artefacts profane power resonating with his own magic. The cloak of the former Avatar, originally an artefact of the accursed Light gods, had been thoroughly desecrated, its pure and pristine white soaked in the blood of their champion and stained beyond recovery.

Summoning a ball of stolen gold and cupping it in both hands, he watched his troops fly all around the enemy's fortress. The purpose of the windmills was as nebulous to him as the thick fog exuded by the swarming mass of his wretched minions, but that did not matter. They existed, and thus, they had to go. For a while, the Keeper was content with just watching his unprepared enemy empty her coffers by summoning her watery hand of evil with reckless abandon to deal with the worthless spectres mowing down her forest of towering mills. He got bored of it soon enough. Gold dust detached from the solid sphere in his grasp, forming rings that circled the dark figure. "All of you, give me your power!" he demanded, his voice echoing through the room. As the vampires started dropping to their knees and collapsing, the red aura around their master swelled into a bonfire, consuming the gold swirling around him. Zarekos grinned, his eyes the same colour as the power burning around him. It was time to show the impudent upstart her place. Which was at the bottom of the ocean. With a maniac cackle, the vampire raised his remaining, smaller sphere of gold high over his head and unleashed the gathered energies, aiming for the highest point of the unsuspecting ice vessel. The magic was designed to bring a localised earthquake into existence to grind solid rock to rubble and bury enemies under falling boulders. He would enjoy observing

exactly how much worse the spell would ravage a structure made of mere ice.

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Counter-Invasion

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"Cave-in spell!" cried a warlock, staring in wide-eyed horror at the screen that showed Zarekos going through the final gestures of his spells. Alerted by his shrill voice, Ami rushed to his side to see what had him so frightened. She didn't know exactly what a cave-in spell did, but the name seemed self-explanatory. The warlock putting his hands on his head and diving underneath his chair, tearing his robe on one of the edges in his haste, gave her a fairly precise idea of what to expect. The command centre turned very quiet after the dark wizard's outburst as everyone looked up at the ceiling. Only Marda kept staring at the crimson-glowing figure of Zarekos on the divining screen and grinding her teeth. Just as Ami's visor slid over her eyes, adapting to the narrow contours of the goblin face, the attack stuck. The walls quivered, humming as their stone bumped into the ice they covered.

Lightning flashed, and it appeared as if lightning had hit the tip of the high ridge in the back third of Ami's iceberg. Small, glittering splinters fountained into the air as a circular disc of ice simply shattered, ripped apart by the force of the spell. With a noise like rolling thunder, deep fissures ate their way outward from ground zero, zigzagging nearly halfway down the hillside. Their branching side fractures tapered out faster, but not before the top of the iceberg crumbled inward like a hollowed-out eggshell. Multi-ton plates of ice rained down into the vessel's bridge, crushing the fake steering wheel underneath their mass.

"The bridge!" Ami blurted out, her borrowed skin blanching to a yellowish green when the instinctive knowledge that her dungeon had been breached slammed into her brain. In her mind's view, the avalanche of debris slid down the ridge's flanks, sheering off the jutting ice thorns protruding from its surface. Worst of all, the closest tendril of ghosts extending from the main mass pushed itself over

the damaged section, clamping down like the maw of a giant worm. "We are being invaded," she shouted as she tried to keep track of the spectral forms floating in through the breach. She needed to get troops there to defend them! She needed to fix the walls! What should she do first? She needed to prevent them from penetrating deeper into her fortress! Ami slammed down the solid portcullises in the main hallway leading up to the bridge just as the first smoke-like white wisps cleared the debris and dashed for it. With angry roars, the transparent faces bared their teeth as they flailed at the thick metal with spectral chains and limbs. *This isn't working,* Ami thought in horror as she realised that more of the malleable creatures were seeping in through the vast networks of fissures. Some of these cracks couldn't be any wider than the gap underneath a door! She needed troops there, now. Reaperbots first. Have them draw the initial attacks before risking flesh and blood employees. Yes. Even as three black metal automatons slammed down in a compromised intersection, Ami's Keeper hand was already racing down a third corridor, holding up its palm as if signalling 'stop' to the undead horde. The watery limb shoved the invaders forward like a bulldozer, squeezing them out through the same fissure they had slipped in. Since the sharp-edged crack in the fortified wall was too narrow to accommodate them all, a fountain of over-pressured ectoplasm gushed out the other side. The hand covering the breach flared with azure light, crystallising into a frozen patch when Ami used a shored Shabon Spray Freezing to seal the entrance. *One down, many to go,* she though. At that moment, the electrical lights died. The final windmill tumbled off the deck, hanging for an instant from its taut steel cables before they snapped with a loud twang and scythed through the mass of ghosts.

Lit only by flickering orange torchlight, the stone-cased tunnels appeared much more sinister and alien than before. *Wait, there is no wind, why are the flames - invisibility!* "Darn it!" The overextended teenager blanketed the corridor with her fog and immediately spotted a few empty spots moving through it, larger than the other ghosts. *They have already gotten further than I thought! Just how many are already in here?* The Keeper hand fell on the foremost creature, gurgling as it squashed it's prey against the ground. A burst of bubbles later, and a barrier of ice cut off that path into her dungeon. Ami pulled away a few trolls from their guard position at

the entrance and positioned them in groups of two around choke points that led further inside from the invaded territory. Where now? There! Her hand crushed more spectres, but she felt as if she was trying to stop a flood with a sieve. At least the fog billowing outward and getting into the cracks seemed to confuse the ghosts. *I hope the soldiers can handle this, I need to fix the breaches!* A hail of Shabon Spray Freezings from her storage plastered the damaged zone like an artillery barrage, clogging up the largest fissures and freezing the rain in its tracks. The smaller ones remained a problem. Maybe if she-

"...eeper. Keeper!"

Ami twitched as she felt a hand touch her shoulder. Whipping her head around so fast that little droplets of sweat went flying, the stressed-out Keeper bared her sharp goblin teeth. "WHAT?"

The warlock shrank back, resembling a turtle as his head retreated into his collar. A shaking finger pointed at the screen. "H-he's doing it again!"

On the divining pool, now supported by the personal power of three closed-eyed warlocks holding hands in front of it, Zarekos was surrounded by an arcane corona once again, his orb of gold much smaller than before. Ami immediately forgot about the man who had interrupted her and focused her full attention on the readout of her visor. If the last spell had... where was... "The storage area!" she shouted as the device displayed the probabilities. The crew let out a collective breath, relieved that the spell wasn't going to strike *them*. That was where the second arm of Zarekos's ghost force was, Ami realised. The ship shook, rattling her teeth, and the ice conducted a loud gurgling noise even down here to the command centre. Clenching her teeth, Ami checked out the damage. Her enemy had learned from her countermeasures, and the new opening was a single, massive gash that went vertically down deep below the waterline. *It's too wide to properly plaster over with my freezing spell!* Scimitar-wielding skeletons standing on the bodies of their spectral comrades surfed down the cascade of seawater that was streaming inside through the breach even as she inspected it. More defenders! She needed more defenders there, and she had to block the branching tunnels! Slam down the floodgates, too. Where were

the other ghosts? And how were the warlocks holding up? And she had almost used up her supply of stored spells! She needed more power! "I'll be right back," she said, crimson-blazing eyes unfocused as she aimed more of her senshi magic at the flood. Water was good. If she could freeze water to block passages, she didn't have to conjure it wholesale. A moment of concentration, and a glittering dam impeded the progress of the flood in one tunnel, but there were others. Brilliant blue light flared, and the foremost of the ghostss, flash-frozen within pillars of gleaming ice, blocked the path of their companions. Undeterred, more crawled in through the finer cracks, but at least Ami had slowed their advance for the moment. The red glow in the goblin captain's eyes died down, and his shoulders slumped.

Zarekos' self-satisfied smirk threatened to split his maggoty-pale face. His exasperating enemy was frivolously taxing her magical resources in a mad, nay, suicidal deluge of water and ice-based thaumaturgy, but failing to fortify the hastily-conjured obstacles with her imps. His hordes would soon haunt the hallways of her dwelling, hacking and hewing their way through the ice. Insulting inexperience showed starkly in each harried move of her frantic defence. Her determination was not lacking, but the delicious dilemma of having to defend a dozen directions from the diligent depredations of his minions divided her attention and slowed her responses. Succinctly stated, she was too slow. The vampire considered the much diminished weight of the valuable ball of gold in his palm. He was already winning, why waste it? Yet, he had known many Keepers who took a devilish delight in the despair of a soon-to-be-defeated opponent. Vain and certain of victory, they played with their target, prolonging its torment as they slackened their pressure. He had seen all of them crushed, many by his own hands. The frown on his bald forehead disappeared, and the sallow skin around his narrow lips tightened, revealing elongated canines. He would not make that mistake. Lifting the glittering sphere high in the air, he flared red, and the worthless minions behind him collapsed once more, groaning as they hit the ground with meaty thuds. Let her deal with a third ingress and become even more confused!

Before the others could worry where Mercury had gone, an orange-skinned and black-striped figure with glowing eyes reappeared in the room. The captain goblin blinked and jumped off the throne as if it had burned him, bowing several times in Tiger's direction as he backed away. Ami hoped that the youma body's own magic, when added to her own, would allow her to cast the Shabon Spray Freezing without straining herself. While she didn't like using the injured youma that way, the creature was undeniably safer here than locked in her prison cell while hostiles prowled around on the ship. She would have used Mareki, but the youma was more useful acting independently, as a brief mental glimpse confirmed.

The huge, horned suit of armour stormed ahead, foregoing the use of its scythe and leaning forward as it barrelled down the walkway between the looming pipes and lattice-work cluttering up the workshop. With each step, the calf-high seawater splashed up around its legs as if struck by a cannonball, forming a frothy wake behind the speeding automaton. Its steel chest plate rang each time it barrelled into a ghost, adding it to the layer of flattened-out spectres covering the dented black ribcage. The climpacts were louder when it was a skeleton that couldn't get out of the way fast enough, and the clatter of flying bones usually accompanied it. A flash of orange howled down the gangway, its glow reflecting off of the workbenches before the projectile slammed into the reaperbot with a deafening bang, all in less time than it took to blink. Stopped cold, the automaton disappeared in a firey conflagration as a blossom of flame enveloped it, boiling the water around its feet - and incidentally, the ghosts stuck to its chest, too. As the automaton toppled forward, the slender form that had clung to its back pushed off of her ride's wide shoulders, somersaulting over its horns and out of the steam cloud. Mareki's green hair fluttered as her arcing trajectory brought her down like an arrow on the skeleton dressed in the frayed remains of a once colourful robe, its smoking, ruby-tipped staff still extended toward its burning target. The grey-skinned youma's fist crashed down on the undead wizard's skull with enough force to drive the spine into the hollow that had once been occupied by its brain. She spotted movement from the left - not the rotten-smelling waterfall streaming in through the gaps in the wall - and

stopped her descent, letting a sharp icicle dart past underneath her feet. Floating over the inrushing water, she rotated in mid-air and unhinged her jaw. The jet of water shooting from her mouth moved in an arc, cutting two of the skeletons waiting there in ambush in half and pushing the third, armour-wearing one off of its feet. A single yellow eye glowered at her balefully from the fleshless skull as the creature sat up. Mareki whipped an approaching ghost out of the air with her reptilian tail, then dodged into cover behind an overturned table when the upper half of one skeletons gestured in her direction. With a splintering thud, the tip of an icicle burrowed through the wood. These guys were a bit more challenging than the pathetic spirits that were swarming the place like ants, she thought. Water splashed behind her, accompanied by a metallic scraping noise, and the youma grinned. Fortunately, the skeletons weren't the only ones who didn't know when to stay down.

Satisfied that her troops had the situation more or less in hand, Ami let the whole extent of the long large breach flash past her mind's eye. Just how deep did the fissure extend down beneath the surface? Grimacing, she flicked two goblins who had been cornered by a band of ghosts into Snyder's infirmary. They hadn't been supposed to be in that corridor! A quick blast here to seal in the blood-dripping spectres, and she checked back on the crack. Down it went along the surface of the iceberg, into the murky depth, branching only slightly. Peering deeper, she noticed a strand of strange, silvery algae. *Wait, algae growing on ice?* The feeling of three doors being bashed open at nearly the same time distracted her and required a frantic flurry of Keeper hand slaps to keep the incursion of skeletal-faced wraiths somewhat under control. Sweating, she went over a list of her troops who she could send to deal with-

"Warriors, fall back to defensive positions in the throne room and main corridor," Marda's loud voice rang distorted and dream-like within the skulls of the defenders, startling Ami.

Dumbfounded, Ami looked at the troll with widened eyes. "What? I didn't order that!" she shouted in a near panic, perceiving that the green creatures under Marda's command were abandoning their

posts, letting the positions be overrun by the enemy. The silhouettes of the coarse humanoids were blurring with the same speed spell that their leader had used against the vampires earlier, and they rushing away from the front much faster than would have liked. "What are you doing? The ghosts are getting everywhere! There are goblins trapped in the kitchen, the farms are already overrun, we have skeletons moving toward the library, and-"

"So what? Zarekos' targets are your dungeon heart and your treasure chamber, and that's the only way to get there. Anything else is replaceable and not worth his while." Marda replied, crossing her arms. "Thus, defending those is all that counts."

"But there are other employees still cut off behind enemy lines, and the ghosts are vandalising everything they can find!" Ami shouted, her opposition less energetic as the cold logic of the troll's words started to sink in, cutting through the cloud of fear and worry clogging up her thoughts since the first breach had opened.

"So chuck them into the throne room if you can spare the time, rather than arguing with me!" Marda roared, her foul-smelling breath hot on Ami's skin.

"What about this room?" Cathy interrupted, pointing at the occupied pilot capsules lining the central gangway. "It's pretty important too, and should be defended." The warlocks behind her agreed completely and nodded, their long beards bobbing up and down in unison.

"This place is perfectly safe. I am in it," Marda stated and banged her fist against the ringing chainmail covering her chest, her other hand on the grip of her warhammer. This prompted the blonde to roll her eyes.

"Keeper, he's doing it again," one of the violet-robed magic users keeping an eye on the scrying windows shouted before the argument could escalate. "Where- "

"Main deck, between the windmills," Ami said before the spell was even finished, and she evacuated an errant warlock from the area. "That's where the third arm of ghosts is." A few seconds later, the

loud cracking noises caused by the ice above shaking and quaking proved her right. Ami winced as one of the cylindrical gem furnaces toppled, struck by a piece of debris tumbling down from the ceiling, and spilled the hot, gooey contents onto the floor. Hissing steam filled the air as the molten mass melted its way deeper down into the iceberg. Above, the shroud-like whiteness of the ghosts shone through the cracks, growing brighter with each instant.

Right, no personnel in the immediately threatened area, no direct routes to the treasury or dungeon heart. Where was she? "Shabon Spray!" The spell, cast remotely, filled the furnace hall, confusing the intruders. More than one let out a strangled howl that suddenly cut off as he stumbled blindly against one of the great cylinders that still retained its heat. Ami backtracked to the last thing she had been doing before being distracted. Algae. A mental change of perspective. Those... were not algae. Puzzled, she followed the rope-like strings downward, getting a worse and worse feeling about this as she spotted the huge, tent-like structure of silvery thread protruding from the bottom of her vessel like a bloated pustule. Something underneath seemed to be quivering. Intrigued and worried by what she would find, she pressed on - and let out a small gasp of revulsion at the sight of uncountable wriggling legs interlocking with each other as they crawled over a huge, half-devoured hunk of decomposing meat. *Spiders?!* Stunned by the sight, Ami still analysed what her mental senses were reporting from inside the trapped air bubble. The huge spine and ribs poking out of the gory mess could only have belonged to a whale, and there were a few reddish lizards burrowing through the mess. *Arachne. She's the one who likes to use spiders.* Shocked at the unexpected find, the stressed teenager wondered what to do, until she hit on a crazy idea. *"Jadeite!"*

Summoned by the mental call, the dark general shimmered into existence, his raised right hand covered in a black nimbus that slowly faded away. Strands of wet, curly hair hung into his face, and his grey uniform showed damp spots. "Yes?" He asked upon identifying Mercury, who was marked by the crimson eyes glowing in the face of the orange-skinned youma body.

"Look at this," Ami said without preamble, and one of the blank, oval

screens on the wall changed to show the spider silk tent located underneath the ship. "Help me tug at this when I ask you to, please!"

The taste of impeding victory was sweet indeed. Zarekos smiled as his opponent's resistance withered before the violent wave of wraiths he was pouring through the wrecked walls of her frozen vessel. She was not even trying now, letting the lowlife living in her swimming lair leave their posts. All that was required now was patience. Patience until his troops were victorious and he could plunder her pathetic playground. Certainly, her minions were manning the defences still, but how long could they last? Mortal flesh would tire eventually, and he had no shortage of ghosts. While he was loathe to take losses like these, he knew that his fate hung in the balance. With luck, the secrets he could dredge out of the ruin would allow him to recover his strength, in particular the puppetry. But for now, a bit of a celebration was in order. The vampire lord snapped his fingers, and an imp appeared before him. The bug-eyed creature's ears drooped as it approached. Producing a knife, it slashed its own underarm and let the red liquid drip into a crystal wine glass. Shaking like a leaf in the wind, the imp offered the drink to its master, well aware of the hungry stares of all the other bloodsuckers in the room, who were looking at the tiny creatures like starving wolves would look at a steak. Some of them were actually slavering.

Ah, this was the unlife, Zarekos thought as he felt the coppery taste of the liquid on his tongue. Watching an enemy being crushed and drinking blood while his lessers looked on in helpless envy. Something white moving below the stormy waves around the iceberg caught his gaze. Whatever it was, it was surfacing rapidly. A kraken? Frozen in the motion of putting his glass to his lips, he gaped as the largest water hand he had seen to date emerged from the sea, dragging something limp and silvery behind it. The dripping object in its grip looked like a giant blanket, held together in such a way that it formed a bag. It unfolded as the hand threw it onto the deck before dissipating into a torrent of salty water that dropped back into the sea.Untold numbers of hound-sized arachnids ambled across the sheet of spider silk draped over the third ingress like a

giant napkin, emerging from a revolting, rotten carcass. Confused at first by the sudden change in environment, the creepy crawlers moved sluggishly until they became aware of the glow closing in on them from all sides, after which they scattered. No! Moronic minions! Zarekos grit his long teeth as the spectres defied his will by diligently following his direct orders, inappropriate to the unpredicted situation as they may have been. The hungry ghosts descended upon the picnic spread out for them, eager to slake their thirst for life on the creatures scrambling around. The vampire lord felt like screaming. Yes, they were supposed to kill every living being on the ship, but they were supposed to go inside first. Inside! Tightening his grip around his glass, he watched helplessly as the stream of ghosts pouring into the iceberg's bowels diminished, with a third of his forces being diverted into a pointless battle against the agile and sharp-limbed spiders. Fools! Keep up the pressure! Ah well. Taking another sip from his glass, Zarekos relaxed slightly. He had already been already winning when he was invading from two locations. Losing the third would not affect his plans too much, though the additional unnecessary casualties were infuriating.

"Now we have spiders fleeing into the ship through the fissures! Is this really an improvement?" Jered wrinkled his nose at the scryed scene, where the tips of long, spindly legs disappeared within a dark fissure.

"They won't fit through the smaller cracks, at least, and they don't get along with the ghosts. Not invisible either," Cathy pointed out, looking at the bright side. "Besides, the bloodsucker is grimacing as if he'd just tried to suck a lemon," the tall woman continued, pointing her thumb at the second screen. He's fresh out of gold, too."

"No more breaching spells from him, then?" Jadeite asked, popping up right next to the other blonde and causing her to jump.

"Yes, and don't do that!"

"Good." The dark general turned to Mercury, inclining his head lightly. "In that case, I will be able to provide us with some breathing room, at least for a short while. Should I go ahead?"

Ami, with half her attention occupied with her efforts to stem the advance of the boarders, nodded, her borrowed lips pressed tightly together.

Jadeite spread his arms, smirking as a white glow flared up in his eyes. "Let's see how the old bat likes *this*!"

The glass in Zarekos' hand shattered as his fingers closed around it, but none of the falling shards were able to dig through his skin. Craning his neck forward, opening his eyes as wide as his eyelids allowed, and staring slack-jawed did not improve his mental vision of the iceberg, but they were an instinctual reaction to his shock. "IMPOSSIBLE! What IS she?" he shouted. Dungeons didn't just mend their breaches from one moment to the other. Yes, he had heard of magic that could fortify walls in an instant, but this, this was ridiculous! Shattered walls did *not* just patch themselves! It had to be an illusion! It had to be! His face turned red, then purple as he watched his troops scratch uselessly at the ice, and he ground the shards still in his hand into powder. This couldn't be happening!

Cathy whistled. "I admit I'm impressed."

"Yes, yes. Now do some productive, such as getting rid of the invaders," Jadeite exclaimed as tiny droplets of perspiration ran down his face. His arms remained extended as he channelled dark energy. "I can't maintain this glamour forever! This iceberg is just too big!"

"Understood. Mercury, I'm going to use your spell to seal of the passages while you come up with a plan, okay?" Cathy offered, quietly going through the motions for the Shabon Spray Freezing as a warm-up.

"Right. Marda, you protect her! Jered, direct her to the worst damage." Ami took a moment to make sure none of her soldiers were in acute mortal danger, and then her computer appeared in her hand. Immediately, her fingers started hammering down on the

keyboard as she reviewed the recordings of Zarekos' cave-in spells, filtering and sorting the data. *He has to be nearby somewhere. None of his dungeon hearts are close enough for his spells to strike over here.*

"Hey, I think the leech just got more bad news," the warlock in charge of observing Zarekos' actions said, snorting through his nose as he suppressed a giggle. On the display, Zarekos was bellowing in anger, his head tilted back and his jaw wide open as plaster rained down from the walls, dislodged by the sheer volume of the shout. The messenger prostrated in front of his master did his best to meld with the floor and make himself overlooked. For good reason, as the vampire lord stepped forward and kicked him in the face, then stomped down again and again before stalking onward. The assembled vampires scattered like birds before a cat as he approached, and he hammered his fists against the wall in mindless fury until he put one straight through the ancient blocks. "What a tantrum. He's not having a good day."

"It's about to get a lot worse," Ami said, her eyes a solid red underneath straw-like green bangs. "I just triangulated his position."

A Meddler Appears

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Ami looked up from the numbers flitting across her computer's display. "The ghosts are retreating!" she informed Jadeite, Jered, and the warlocks who were with her in the command centre. In her minds eye, the white-glowing specks on the hull rose into the air like a cloud of flower seeds that had been buffeted by a strong gust of wind. A number of them remained among the stumps of the broken windmills, too entranced with leeching the life out of the spider spawn they were battling to heed the call of their master and return to the mainland.

"Good! Maybe his Imperial-Pain-in-the-Neck has decided that he isn't going to get at us and is conserving his troops," Jered said, smiling.

"I think he's just reacting to the news," one of the warlock stated. The robed mage glanced over at Mercury on the throne, hoping that his unsolicited comment hadn't upset the Keeper. Seeing only polite interest on her tiger-striped face, he dared continue, gesturing toward the active divining pool. Zarekos, his right arm covered in pulverised stone up to the elbow, was gesticulating wildly and shouting at his underlings. Next to his head floated a wavering mirage that showed a dungeon heart of the organic type, pulsing softly as it emitted green motes of mana. "He has a much more pressing problem on his hands. An active Keeper on his island, if his reaction is anything to go by."

"Hmm." Ami wasn't sure whether to consider this a blessing or an additional complication. She would have to think about this more when she wasn't balancing observing her troops, pulling the wounded away from the front lines, and patching up the breaches, all while also trying to determine the best way to attack Zarekos. The most logical location for the new arrival was clear, though. "Please scry on the area of the dungeon heart that we destroyed earlier."

Ami barely recognised the tunnels she had last seen shedding the trappings of Zarekos' dungeon, with the murals flaking off and the red-patterned tiles shaking lose before bursting into shards. Instead of dark, damp corridors and halls that had reverted to natural rock after the death of the dungeon, she beheld smoothed floors with diamond-shaped yellow inlays, brightly lit by copper braziers hanging from iron chains in regular intervals. The black smoke from the sputtering pots gathered at the highest point of the ceiling's arch, far from the heads of the imps who sporadically scuttled through the tunnels. The little servant creatures were busy fortifying sections of the walls, which were bare rock for the entire length of the passage that the divining screen showed.

"There's a lot of water down there," Jered commented after seeing the brackish soup at the bottom of a deep, bridged crevasse that separated parts of the newcomer's domain. "Doesn't look greenish like the rain here. They must have dug a pipeline all the way to the ocean while Zarekos was distracted!"

Ami doubted this. Even for imps, tunnelling eight kilometres to the shore in that short amount of time would have been difficult. *Or maybe not,* she changed her opinion when one of the little creatures popped into view in a whirl of green sparkles, hacked apart a boulder that was obstructing the path, and disappeared the same way it had come. *My imps never did that,* she thought, feeling a pang of disappointment. *The ice golems would have been so much more useful that way!*

"All right, so there's a Keeper down there who knows how to lock the vampires out, has set up shop in an area where Zarekos' powers no longer work, and has imps who can claim terrain at an alarming rate? Yeah, getting at us has just become largely irrelevant in the great scheme of things," Ami's wavy-haired advisor summarised the situation as he evaluated it.

"I can see why he would be raging and redirecting his troops," Ami answered, "but unfortunately, he's not withdrawing the monsters that are already on the ship. Jadeite, how are you holding up?"

The dark general was meditating with closed eyes, sitting on one of the unoccupied chairs usually reserved for a warlock. Droplets of

sweat ran down his face freely as he grunted "I'd be grateful if you hurried up and got rid off the intruders already!"

"All right." She looked over to Jered, who was standing in front of the scrying window, checking out the enemy dungeon.

"From what I'm seeing here, that Keeper, whoever he is, would deserve the reputation that you have involuntarily acquired for yourself," the weasel-featured man said. "All female troops." He whistled at the sight of shiny black fabric, and not a lot of it, clinging snugly to full curves, and continued "I have to say, the contrast between alabaster-white dark elf skin and all that leather is quite deli- ugh! My eyes! I think I just threw up a bit in my mouth!" Jered turned green around the nose as he averted his eyes from the screen, where a trio of bile demons who bulged in more than the usual places dragged their quivering bulks around the corner. To Ami, it looked as if the fire-red creatures had visited the same tailor as she had, but had failed to ward off his first suggestions.

Shuddering, Ami returned her attention to the much less disturbing mental view of the battles within her iceberg. "All right. What are the dangers if I delay attacking Zarekos to secure the dungeon first?" While she was sure that incinerating his casting chamber right now with a well-placed firestorm spell would feel very therapeutic, the vampire and his brood would just resurrect a short while later, gaining her nothing. No, she would have to risk delaying until she could spare the time to set up one of her more devastating counter-moves.

"He could move away and you'd lose track of him. No, wait, it would be even worse if he got his hands on the other Keeper's gold. We'd be back to getting our defences ripped apart."

"Then we need to make sure that this can't happen," Ami said. The corners of her lips curved upward, as if she was laughing at a private joke.

The new Keeper's treasure chamber followed the general colour scheme of his dungeon, with a black-and-amber chequered floor

and hard-angled architecture. Excluding the minions, there was nary a curve in sight, and even the decorative marble pillars were square, rather than round. Instead of soft arches, triangular arcs of stone topped the columns. Even seen merely through a scrying pool, the polished ambience of the place evoked the same feelings in Ami as the foyer of a large bank would, despite the quirks of its masonry. Of course, no respectable bank would leave its money out in an enormous open chest that brimmed over with gold coins and glittering jewels. In addition, the four huge bile demon guards thoroughly ruined the carefully-cultivated air of sophistication and refined elegance, merely by being there. They didn't look too alert, Ami thought, wishing she hadn't seen one of them pick her nose and bring the finger to her smacking lips. The thick vault door made of steel explained their lack of vigilance, as any intruder would have to get past this sturdy obstacle first. Or so the demons thought. When a ball of fog appeared out of thin air, billowing outward, the fat blobs looked up in surprise and grunted. Morning stars dangling from long, horizontal horns swished through the air as the creatures turned their heads left and right, rolling their eyes as they tried to find out what was going on. Surprise gave way to alarm when the fog condensed into a huge, transparent hand that pounced upon the gold-filled box they were supposed to guard. Ami didn't expect for the rippling Keeper hand to turn into ice the moment it touched its quarry - this was a kind of trap she hadn't encountered before - but it hardly mattered. Even frozen, the ambulant limb retained a solid grip on the treasure chest. Both rose into the air and disappeared before the guards could reach and shatter the limb. Left alone in the robbed room, the red-skinned blobs looked at each other and gulped.

"That cheeky, cheating, no-good little *thief*!" a giant of a man roared. Muscles like steel cables writhed underneath his fair skin as his fingers dug like angry claws into the velvet pillows. Half-sunken into the depths of the cushions, the man's bulk still towered above the trio of naked concubines surrounding it, who were ducking their heads at his outburst.

"Why, my dear Morrigan, it sounds as if you have run into a spot of trouble!" said a voice that sounded much too cheerful for something

that consisted entirely of the rustle of chitin limbs rubbing against each other.

"Fuck you, Arachne," the bare-chested Keeper bellowed, glaring up at the glowing crystal ball that had floated into his sight.

"Thanks for the offer, but I find myself lacking the required anatomy," the cloud of insects that was the spider-loving Keeper answered.

"Don't you have anything better to do with your time than annoying me?" Morrigan snapped. "Like, for example, watching Mercury use your precious crawlers to fend off Zarekos' minions? You are such a joke."

"Oh dear, you wound me. How will I ever get over the failure of this elaborate, expensive plan, into which I had invested an *entire* pregnant spider and some salamander eggs?" the other Keeper mocked. "Your premature invasion, however, will cost you much more."

Morrigan narrowed his eyes at the floating orb. "You are underestimating me severely. I will not lose here."

"Well, you are off to a great start with Mercury plundering your war chest," Arachne pointed out and snickered. "Don't think I didn't see that."

"I can make more gold, just like this," Morrigan said, snipping his fingers. "At worst, she has delayed me. My primary objective is in no danger."

"And what would that be?"

"Oh, just preventing her from exploiting the gap she opened in the old bat's defences. I have no intention of attacking him myself. What for? His land is useless, but if she wants it, she'll have to fight him again! Meanwhile, I'll be waiting and building my power while both sides expend their forces." Looking smug, the Keeper stuffed an entire bunch of grapes into his mouth. Some of the sticky juice escaped his lips and trickled down his huge chin.

"A plug on a hole. What a glorious role you have chosen for

yourself. Yet even that simple task will be beyond you. As I told you before, what you don't know about Mercury will get you burnt."

"Oh, slink back into whatever hole you crawled out of," Morrigan dismissed his equal and reached out over the pillows to grab one of his attendants by her shapely leg. With a squeal of surprise and pain, the woman was pulled over as he prepared to indulge in other appetites.

Ami dropped the loot unceremoniously in her own treasure chamber, where it landed on the ground with a soft thud. A rat scuttled out of the shadows and approached cautiously, twitching its nose as it sniffed the new box. Moments later, it let out an offended squeak and bounded away, bleeding from its nostrils. *Bile demons,* the young Keeper shuddered. *A locked room would concentrate the smell...*

Putting thoughts about evil poison gas out of her mind for now, Ami rushed to the aid of her troops, who were dealing with the task of ridding her dungeon of the enemies infesting it. Cathy and Marda were advancing toward the largest of the breaches on foot, making sure that they did not bypass any enemies that would then be able to sneak attack them from behind. The blonde swordswoman was no slouch, but despite her senshi enchantments, Marda was making her look like a rank amateur in comparison. The armoured troll was a whirling dervish of destruction that cut like a buzz saw through any resistance the duo encountered. The blurring head of her hammer homed in unerringly on any encountered ghosts and skeletons, dispatching them at such a speed that Cathy found her time more usefully occupied by casting Shabon Spray whenever it proved convenient. Ami could feel the drain on her magic reserves whenever the warrior borrowed power from her, but since she was only using the senshi's initial attack, that was barely an inconvenience to the young Keeper. Reassured that the two could handle themselves, she deposited a few rats behind them. She instructed the rodents to claim any new ice that Cathy produced while sealing up the sections of the iceberg that would become compromised by cracks as soon as Jadeite's glamour faded away and the vessel reverted to its damaged state. For her part, Ami was

walling off sections of the ship after her troops had passed through, preventing hiding spectres from getting into already cleared rooms. Constructing walls with the dungeon heart to block off passages was proving surprisingly difficult. It was almost as if the artefact was reluctant to give up any part of the territory it had claimed and refused to cover it up. However, it had no problems with cladding over a conjured wall of ice, so Ami used this workaround. She supposed she should be grateful to Keeper Whoever-It-Was for providing the funds she was using up with her rapid construction, even if a full third of the chest's contents had evaporated into a mist of motes when she had attempted to use it. Satisfied with her progress, she checked how her warriors in the less important parts of the dungeons were doing.

A green-skinned goblin sped down a debris-littered side corridor as fast as her little legs could carry her, letting out a frightened wail. Behind her, a pale glow was catching up, outshining the dim glow of the sputtering torches on the walls. Their fires died the moment the group of five moaning ghosts pursuing their unarmed prey passed them, extinguished by the unnatural chill that the creatures exuded.

Breathing heavily, the running goblin spared the time for a look over her shoulder, and immediately tripped over a piece of masonry in her way. She cried out in shock and scrambled onwards on all four as the murderous spectres swooped toward her. The goblin flipped on her back as the enemies approached, and brought up her right arm, as if to shield her face against her incoming attackers. However, rather than protecting herself, she pulled down her lower eyelid, poked a dark green tongue out at the decayed-looking spectres and produced a farting noise. Unimpressed, the undead creatures descended upon her. With a sound like a bursting tomato, the skull-like faces framed by writhing, grey hair came to a sudden stop as the foremost of them slammed into an unseen obstacle. The ones behind it pushed forward, pressing their ill-defined outlines against the invisible wall. The goblin got to her feet and made a rude gesture. Ghostly flesh ripped in half like paper when a guillotine dropped from the ceiling, bisecting the entire ill-positioned quintet, and splashing gooey ectoplasm against the obstacle. The goblin

giggled. Somewhere nearby, a poorly-oiled wheel squeaked as it was turned, and with rattling chains, the huge blade ascended back into the ceiling. Behind her, robes rustled, and a warlock with a neatly-trimmed black beard stepped around the corner. He gave the green creature a thumbs-up and muttered a few unintelligible syllables in the direction of the wall that was shimmering into sight. The brickwork, blocking the entire corridor except for a gap near the bottom, just high enough for a goblin to crawl through, glittered and faded back into invisibility.

"Good. Now get more," the magic user ordered, pointing back down the passage that the goblin had come from.

Three twanging noises echoed through the dungeon, followed by frantic screeches and scratching as three dog-sized spiders collapsed and twitched in their death throes, oozing yellow ichor from their wounds. A fourth metal bolt whistled past and bounce off of the half-open portcullis leading to the farm, causing chitinous legs to shrink back from the opening.

"That makes twenty-three. I am further increasing my lead," a mental voice announced, sounding amused.

"You is cheating! You got too many arms!" a goblin answered, struggling to reload his crossbow. Next to him, a multi-eyed mass of tentacles was pointing three of the weapons at the door leading to the spider-infested room while simultaneously cocking three more with the rest of its appendages.

"Not everyone can be as naturally gifted as I am," Tserk stated modestly, keeping an eye pair dedicated to each weapon. The tentacle monster's green and black bulk quivered like jelly as it chuckled. *"Take heart. You are still ahead of our illustrious leader, who hasn't deigned to turn his magic against a single spider yet."*

The short-bearded warlock bowed over a partly disassembled control panel looked up from his work. "Hmm? Oh, don't rush me." Erasmus finished slotting ten gold coins into the messy arrangement of cables and hastily-drawn runes that expanded the existing array

in ways that made the eyes water. "Yes, that should work," he muttered to himself, "I sure hope she reimburses me for that." Ignoring the twanging noises of firing crossbows, he drew his finger across the diagram and mumbled a short incantation. Powered by his gold, the portcullis slammed shut, and the growth-accelerating mechanisms within the farming room activated. Scores of spiders within cried out in pain - briefly - as the gap at the bottom of its doorway lit up and the smell of roasted chitin wafted out. The magic user's purple robe swished as he turned to his companions with crossed arms, looking smug. "I win."

Pots and tableware were strewn about on the ground of the kitchen, and an overturned table served as a makeshift bar for its battered door. Ami quickly transported two of the unconscious, bleeding 'health inspectors' to Snyder's infirmary. Brugli, the fat goblin cook, was standing amid the debris of her kitchen, staring with a malevolent grin at her largest pot, which was dancing on the stove. Ami noticed that its lid was secured with chains, and wisely decided not to inquire further. So far, her soldiers had been able to hold their own against the invasion forces more easily than she had expected, which was a relief. Her expression softened when she looked at Jadeite, who was sweating hard. "It's all right, you can let go of the glamour now. All the important parts of the vessel are now cut off from the exterior completely."

"Finally," the curly haired blonde said as he slumped in his chair and the light in his eyes died down. Immediately, a jolt went through the vessel as parts of it simply disappeared and it once again displayed the damages from the previous battle. With a loud groan, the floor inclined several degrees as the iceberg's balance changed.

"Good work, Jadeite. You saved us here," Ami congratulated the dark general. A scowl marred her borrowed features when she returned her gaze to the divining pool, where Zarekos was staring into the air, jaw clenched in deep concentration. If her guess was right, the vampire lord was gathering troops as fast as he could and depositing them as close to the land he was banished from as he could, massing them for a devastating and desperate assault. Thankfully, he hadn't moved yet. "Jadeite, how much can you

change the size of your portals?" she asked, and the crimson glow in her eyes intensified.

Ami was in perhaps the only location where the orange colouration of her borrowed body could serve as camouflage. This Underworld section consisted of a vast subterranean lava sea whose light stained every inch of the stalagmite-like rock towers protruding from its depths, painting them in tones reaching from rust-red to yellow. The fire-immunity spell was a blessing right now, even here, several hundred metres above the bubbling expanse, whose constant roar was muted by the distance. Jadeite was sitting on the highest outcropping of the spire, pouting. Ami worried that she had offended his pride when she offered to carry him for a change, allowing him to relax some more after straining himself so. Her youma body was certainly large and muscular enough for such an undertaking. She shook her head at his reaction. Men. An impatient gesture of the dark general's white gloved hand stirred her out of her thoughts. Quickly, she joined him as he pointed at the black ellipse floating at eye height, no larger than a hand mirror. Curious, Ami peered through the opening, holding her breath to remain as silent as possible. In the circular cut-out she could see part of the pentagram emblazoned on the floor of Zarekos' casting chamber. Shifting to the side, she adjusted her point of view until she caught sight of the enemy Keeper himself. The magical teenager had taken a risk when she dared leave the safety of her dungeon through one of Jadeite's portals to enter the Underworld, but she felt fairly certain that Zarekos wouldn't be able to sense her here. Even if he could, he probably wouldn't be able to just come here at a whim. And even if he was, he would hopefully be too busy to actually do so. Ami was prepared to flee at the first sign of trouble, but so far, her hunch seemed to have been correct. The evil creature showed no sign of being aware that she was watching him, even though she could feel a cool breeze blow into her face through the small oval. Cautiously and meticulously, Ami positioned her limbs relative to the Keeper's standing form, and a chain appeared in her hands. Her plan relied on surprise, speed, and a precision teleport that would be impossible without direct line of sight with the target. She rolled her shoulder blades to loosen her muscles and took a deep breath as

she focused her entire attention on her enemy. Her throat felt very dry as she shifted her weight onto her foremost foot. *Now or never!*

A flash of blue startled Zarekos, and he felt strong arms and legs appear around his torso from out of nowhere. Some fool's warm and curvy body pressed itself against his back even as he felt the uncomfortable hardness of cold metal wrapped around his throat. The lord of the realm had a surprisingly well-developed survival instinct for someone who was not technically alive, and transported himself away at the first sign of trouble, no matter how much he longed to guzzle down the blood of the moron who had dared jump on a vampire's back. Alarmed, he realised in a split second that the environment was not changing in the way he had intended.

Almost as soon as Ami made contact with Zarekos's back, she could feel his elbow jerk backwards. The fierce jab, too fast to be anything but reflexive, caught her toward the bottom of the ribcage. Before the pain could properly register, she pulled herself and her prisoner into her longest teleport to date, elated that the property of dungeon hearts to suppress travelling magic for captives was working in her favour, for once. Underneath her fingers, the form of the vampire was melting and shifting, its flesh parting and crawling in disgusting ways as he attempted to change his shape in order to break free. Zarekos' enraged bellow turned into a high-pitched screech of absolute terror when he felt the hateful touch of sunlight caressing his skin. How could this be? It was three hours past midnight!

Ami let go when the vampire exploded into a darting flame, dispersing into ash that wafted down toward the glittering, lethal-for-bloodsuckers ocean below. Ami stared at the grey dust drifting in the breeze, almost unable to believe her eyes. No disappearing black ooze. Success! She had really done it! Feeling woozy, not only from the effort of teleporting halfway around the world with a passenger, but also from the injury that was making itself felt with a dull, throbbing ache, she prodded at her side. Shattered ribs. *Note to self: in the future, avoid close contact with vampires at all costs. I'll have to apologise to the owner of this body if she ever regains her mind.*

"Cathy, get the goblins ready for a different task! We are attacking!"

Ami ordered, back in her own body. Her sudden reappearance startled the warlocks, who had only caught the local part of her confrontation with Zarekos.

The blonde, disoriented by finding herself back in the command centre all of a sudden, gaped at the blue-haired girl slumping in the command chair. "Wha- right! Uh, who are we attacking?"

Ami was already talking to Jadeite, who had appeared just as abruptly in the room. "Jadeite, there is no time to lose. I need that other Keeper gone before he can fortify his position properly. Portal some lava into places he absolutely won't want it, please!"

"Yes, Lady Mercury," the curly-haired blond said, taken aback by the intensity in her eyes. He faded from sight almost before he had finished his bow, but not before she could spot the mischievous grin on his face.

"Wait, how are we attacking? Where do you want the reaperbots? Is a transport ship ready?" Cathy asked, trying to follow her sailor-suited superior's train of thought.

"Don't worry, I will handle the details. Just make sure that the pilots are ready," Ami answered as she lined up the surviving automatons on the wrecked deck. What remained of the confused ghosts and spiders sneaked away, avoiding the unappetising foes. "We won't need to rely on stealth this time."

Eline had been wary of travelling to the undead-infested Avatar Isles at first, but Keeper Morrigan had a good thing going here, in the dark elf's opinion. Watery ditches kept the vampires away, the skeletons went for the bile demons first, since those were their natural enemies, and her sturdy crossbow could handle any ghosts that dared show themselves in the long, straight tunnels. The pay was good, and it had looked like a relaxing assignment. That was before everything had caught on fire for some enigmatic reason. The lightly-dressed woman rushed through the corridors, coughing from the billowing smoke that stung in her eyes. She was going toward the surface, she realised with some trepidation. That was where the

ghosts were. Oh well, probable death at the skeletal hands of the spectres was preferable to certain death from asphyxiation. If she could just hold out long enough for the Keeper to notice her plight, he would transport her somewhere safe. Flattening herself against the wall, she inched past a puddle of glowing lava that hadn't been there on her previous pass through this place. Not far to the exit and fresh air now. And ghosts. Can't forget the ghosts. A loud crash from ahead made her wonder what was going on. From time to time, she thought she heard a man's maniacal laughter echo through the dungeon, but no matter how she adjusted her pointy ears, she couldn't pinpoint the source. Coughing and panting, she emerged from the tunnel into the night outside. It wasn't raining acid right now, thankfully. Eline looked around, searching for any trace of undead ready to suck her life out. She did not forget to look up either. With her superior night vision, she spotted something decidedly odd. From the direction of the ocean, a flying object was approaching. It was speeding across the night sky in a ballistic arc, but wasn't moving fast enough to have been fired from a catapult. Not that she had ever seen a catapult with that kind of range in the first place. Squinting, she tried to get a closer look before realising that the mysterious thing was coming straight at her. Was- was that a giant, transparent hand carrying it? Instincts taking over, the archer threw herself aside, cowering behind a boulder as something large whistled through the air and landed in a nearby magma pool with a muddy plop. Curiosity got the better of the elf, and she poked her head out of her hiding place to watch the rippling, molten pond.

With red-hot lava dripping from its wide shoulders, a tall figure wielding a scythe rose from its crouch. Button-like blue eyes in an expressionless, horned face slowly turned in the dark elf's direction.

"Crap."

"Don't kill if you can avoid it," Ami instructed, her voice flat from the weariness catching up with her.

"You hear that? Keeper want prisoners! Fun!" one of the goblins in the control capsules cheered.

"Prisoners! Fun! Prisoners! Fun!" the others chanted, voices dripping with enthusiastic malice.

"Ahhrgh! They won't stay down! They just won't stay down!" A frightened dark elf screamed as she sprinted across the bridge leading to the heart chamber. She could see flames waver behind the two bunkers flanking the railing-less stone catwalk. "Let me in! Let me in!" she pleaded through the crenelations, hammering with her fist against the iron gate. "Its chest is an entire forest of crossbow bolts, but it just won't fall!" Behind her, white fog crept toward the defensive positions through the corridor she had come from. "Damnation, I'm out of here!"

As the dark elf sprinted off in the direction of the portal, the guards peered into the swirling mix of mist and acrid smoke. The first thing to emerge was a bull-sized hand made of purest water, crawling forward on its fingers. Behind it, three black, horned, terribly familiar silhouettes with glowing eyes peeled themselves out of the fog, and the sound of multiple heavy hooves on rock promised that there were more behind them. The defenders started shaking in their boots. They weren't paid enough for this!

"You cowards! Come back! They are just automatons!" Morrigan roared, furious at the lack of spirit his minions were displaying while the enemy got closer and closer to the core of his dungeon. They couldn't hear him, of course, being on a different continent. Out of spite, he grabbed those closest to the safety of the portal and hurled them into the middle of the enemy force. It didn't help, but it made him feel better. He destroyed the bridge, but a new one made of ice replaced it nearly instantaneously.

How? How was Mercury doing this to him? The troops were meant to handle the undead, not... this! Why was she attacking NOW? Why wasn't Zarekos stopping her? AND WHY WAS EVERYTHING ON FIRE? It was too early, the traps weren't ready yet, mostly due to her thievery. When had everything gone to pieces?

To add insult to injury, a certain crystal ball lit up and rose from its socket.

"Don't say it!" Morrigan snarled, pressing his hands against his hairless chest and writhing in pain as the first blow struck his dungeon heart.

Arachne's voice from the crystal ball giggled. "Very well. It is enough that we both know that I was right, after all."

"Shut up! You could have warned me about the lava!" the angry Keeper gasped, cringing at each new pang of pain that his assaulted dungeon heart was transmitting to him.

"Yes. Isn't it just hilarious?"

"If I ever get my fingers on you, I will pull the wings off of every single fly that constitutes your sorry excuse for a body!"

"Kinky. However, I believe you have an appointment with Azzy right about now," Arachne mocked. "See you around. Maybe."

"Cuuurse youuuu!" Morrigan howled, his voice dwindling as the distant, imploding dungeon heart sucked him in.

Last edited: Sep 9, 2016

Vampire Reactions

Originally on 2010-07-29T17:35:00

The vampires in Zarekos octagonal casting chamber stood at ceremonial positions along the candle-lit walls, looking like monoliths in their dark, flowing robes. Instead of looming with quiet dignity, they stared in stunned disbelief at the empty pentagram where their emperor used to be. A large, orange-skinned female had appeared out of nowhere and abducted him, pulling him into a swirl of blue light before he - or they - could react. Only a few ethereal snowflakes remained, floating gently toward the engraved brass plate on the ground.

"What just- do you feel it? Do you feel it too?" a vampire whispered, blurting out the words as fast as she could in her excitement.

Shadow-like black fabric rustled next to her as a pale bloodsucker stepped out of the group, approaching the pentagram with slow, measured steps. His tongue darted over his lips, as if he was tasting the air. He was the first to put into words what the others all felt on an instinctual level. "The Master... is gone? But how did she-"

"Dead..." "Is he truly gone?" "Could it be?" "Gone!"

The dark crowd shifted as vampires left their spots, bringing their backs closer to the walls and slinking into the darkness. Suspicious glances were exchanged, but the initially cautious whispers in the back grew louder and more excited as time passed. After years of servitude, the undead found it hard to believe that the will of their sire, which had enslaved them for so long, was gone for good. Some of the pale figures let out whoops of joy, while the older vampires withdrew silently, trying not to draw attention to their movements. They had been around during the worst of the chaos after Mukrezar's fall, when everyone fought everyone else for the dwindling amount of food, territory and influence. Without Zarekos to provide stability, that war could very well restart, and this time it would be even worse, since there was no prey and much less

infrastructure to be seized. Each of the other vampires had just become a potential enemy. With a flutter and a whoosh of inrushing air, a few of the fastest thinkers disappeared, causing the chatter of the others to die down.

"The dungeon hearts!" a shorter vampire with a receding chin cried out, his wide face lighting up with greed before he glowed red and disappeared. Some of the lurking bloodsuckers raised their eyebrows and shook their heads, frowned, or looked thoughtful. The casting chamber was emptying quickly.

Pressing himself close to the wall of the high room, the vampire Nuril observed his brethren while he hid behind the pillars where the shadows were thickest. He was not prone to rash action and preferred to think things through. Yes, on the surface, this looked like the opportunity of a lifetime for an ambitious vampire. If he was fast enough, he would be able to grab one of the late emperor's now unclaimed dungeon hearts and become its master. Speed was of supreme importance of course, since the others would have the same idea. However, what would he do after he became a dungeon keeper? He would be stuck in the same trap as Zarekos. Worse even. The powerful, penniless Keeper had been able to defend his hearts by calling upon a vast contingent of powerful, obedient spawn that was unable to refuse his orders. Nuril, in contrast, would be stuck with a dungeon heart and whatever ghosts and skeletons he could dominate and press into his service -which he could do just as well without a big, stationary artefact that would be nothing but a useless weakness without gold. He snickered as he imagined the faces of some of his more short-sighted brethren once realisation dawned, but too late. The smarter - or merely hungrier - vampires would have left by now to secure the remaining imps for themselves. Nuril's mouth watered involuntarily at the mere thought of the delicious, crimson liquid pulsating within the short, pathetic creatures' veins. His stomach writhed and growled like a furious beast, and it took all of his will to keep himself from teleporting to their pen and feasting like a glutton. Fifteen long, dry years could do that to a vampire. No, focus. He couldn't lose himself in bloodlust now! If his thoughts didn't remain clear, he was as good as dust! A brick in the wall cracked as his fingers dug into it while he fought to keep his feeding urge from overwhelming him. Only Zarekos' two

main bases were worth fighting over, he concluded. Whoever held the graveyards would have a nigh-unbeatable advantage over the other vampires, who could not revive without them. Besides, they could be partially cannibalised for gold, thus covering the start-up cost for a new dungeon.

"Nurgil. Still here as well?" A clear, female voice startled the vampire, since it came from behind him and he had his back to the wall.

The dark-clad vampire tilted his head backward and looked up. A black-haired female, half a head shorter than him, hung upside-down from the ceiling like an overgrown bat, waving her paper fan. Neither she nor the group of three more vampires that surrounded her had a hair or a drape of cloth out of place, as if gravity was completely optional. "Nali. I see you and your associates are also wary of rushed decisions."

"Oh ho ho ho. Quite right, my dear brother." The fanged woman's laugh would have sounded shrill and grating if a mortal throat had produced it. Coming from her undead lips, it sounded sinister and seductive.

"And what course of action did you settle on?" he asked, genuinely curious as he walked up the wall to join her and her circle.

"Weeeeell, we would love to just go to the nearest portal and flee into the Underworld, but our dead, late, *inconsiderate* Master smashed them all a long time ago," she pouted.

That was a surprisingly smart suggestion from his sister. One of her companions had to have come up with it. "That new Keeper restored a portal to bring his troops in, but it is guarded by both monsters and water," Nuril pointed out. "Still, in bat form, we might make it past unnoticed..."

"I would prefer to wait until one of the intruders has come out on top and his alertness has waned. In the meantime, we have something more important to do."

"Rescuing our coffins from the graveyard while the others are

battling it out for the privilege of whom gets to be ground into the dirt by the invaders?" Nuril was sure now that the charismatic but scatterbrained women was letting someone else do the thinking for her. In all the time he had known her, she had never once showed any concern about the non-immediate future.

The vampiress waved her fan, as if she wanted to shoo away his suggestion. "Indeed, yes, that would be on the list too, later. But first, we should find Zarekos' stash of magical items before someone else does. I have some idea of where to start looking..." she prattled on, while her brother suppressed the urge to hide his face in his palms. He would be better off without her and her posse, after all. Turning into a bat and making a break for the portal was starting to sound more and more attractive. However, getting shot when he wasn't entirely sure that he would still be able to resurrect himself wasn't his idea of a good plan, and those dark elves could be awfully accurate with a crossbow. Maybe he should instead see if the victorious Keeper was willing to hire him.

"Ha! We did it!" Cathy cheered, thrusting her fist into the air. The grinning warlocks powering the scrying window whooped as they watched the enemy dungeon heart crumble during its death throes. A maelstrom of black energies spiralled inward, sucking a ghostly, spinning figure down into the pit. It disappeared into the bottomless darkness underneath visible through a deep gash in organic heart's membrane, too fast for the blonde to make out anything but a male-looking silhouette. As if sated after devouring the enemy Keeper, the black rip in space sealed up while the dungeon heart's superstructure collapsed, burying the ruined artefact underneath a pile of dust and rubble. The reaperbots, some dented and burned, others sprouting crossbow bolts from many shallow punctures all over their metal shells, raised their scythes in triumph. They jumped, waved their hands, and capered around like a bunch of overexcited goblins. In the command centre, the pilot capsules shook from the volume of the pilots' victory cries.

"We the best! We the best!" "We smash enemy Keeper!" "Yeeeaahhhh!"

On her throne, Ami smiled brightly. The goblin's enthusiasm was infectious, and she sat up straight and clapped her hands together, almost forgetting about the leaden tiredness she felt after being drained by ghosts and throwing spells all night. "Great work, everyone. I will be sure to take your performance into account next pay-day."

The goblins' cheering cut off abruptly. "What she said?" one of them asked after a moment, sounding suspicious.

"She said she'll pay you more because you did well," Cathy translated, which caused an even louder outburst of cheers.

"Whee!" "We get nice toys and nice pay!"

"However," Ami interrupted them, though she had to try twice to make herself heard over the noise, "we are not done yet. Please gather the injured opponents who didn't make it to the portal," she ordered.

"Yay! Prisoners!" the goblins shouted. On the screen, two reaperbots ran into each other as both tried to sprint out through the doorway at the same time, both eager to be the one who collected the most captives.

"And make sure to handle them carefully!" Ami blurted out upon noting their zeal.

"This went extremely well," Jered said in a low voice as he approached the blue-haired girl, who was settling more comfortably in her command chair. "How could you be so sure that Zarekos wouldn't interfere while you went after the other Keeper? Just a good guess, or did you manage to seriously mess him up?" the wavy-haired man asked.

Ami blinked. "Oh. Right, I didn't get the time to tell you yet. Zarekos is gone. He won't be coming back."

"What?" Cathy, who had overheard them, stepped closer with long, fast strides. "You mean you just beat two enemy Keepers in less than an hour? One of which controlled a continent full of the

undead? That's unbelievable!" she said, raising her voice enough to draw surprised glances.

Ami inclined her head upon hearing the blonde's awed tone. "Well, I didn't really do that much," she said, feeling that she didn't really deserve the amazed looks that her employees were sending her way. "I simply took him to a sunlit spot over the ocean on the other side of the planet, where it's day now. If he had relied on possession to keep himself alive, rather than on his vampiric resurrection, I wouldn't have been able to do it at all."

"Still, that means we already won the war!" Cathy said, smiling from ear to ear. "Aside from the mop-up operations, that is, but with nobody to unify the enemy forces..." Her tone became more businesslike as she started pacing around. "Hmm, we'll have to make sure other Keepers won't pre-empt us, but... Hey Marda, what do you think about this?" The blonde looked around, searching for the distinctive gleam of the troll's chainmail.

"She isn't here," Jered said. "Hasn't been here for a while, actually."

Cathy put a finger to her chin and furrowed her brow. "Now that I think about it, I haven't seen her since I got back. Mercury, do you know what she's up to?"

Ami didn't answer. The teenager sat slumped in her seat with closed eyes. Her chin had sunken onto her collarbone, having not risen since she had last inclined her head.

The female warrior leaned over the younger girl and took a closer look, noting the gently rise and fall of the blue bow on Mercury's chest with some relief. "Huh, she has fallen asleep, just like that. Do you think I should get Snyder?"

"Well, let's see. We have all been awake for almost a full day, she has been drained by ghosts, cast spells all night, and teleported halfway around the world. Twice." Jered said, raising a finger at each point. "That's not even mentioning you pulling power from her while you were patching up the damage to the iceberg. I think sleep is a pretty normal reaction to all of that. Frankly, I'm surprised she didn't collapse from exhaustion any earlier."

"We probably should let her rest, then, unless some new emergency comes up." Cathy said. "There are no issues that she would have to address right this moment, but we need to find out what exactly got destroyed by the boarders, which rooms are flooded, and who got hurt and whether we took casualties." The tall woman paused. "Oh, and we need to gather the prisoners and put them somewhere safe. Jadeite, can you handle getting them to the ship?"

The dark general was sitting on one of the chairs intended for the warlocks, leaning forward and supporting his head with his hands, which were in turn supported by the elbows resting on his knees. At the mention of his name, half-closed eyelids rose, and steel-blue irises focused on the long-haired blonde.

"I suppose someone has to do it," he drawled tiredly. The day's struggle had taken its toll on him, too.

"Well, you could also tuck her into bed, if you want an easier task," Jered grinned and pointed his thumb at Mercury, who was sleeping peacefully on her oversized throne.

Jadeite faded out of sight without a word, no longer blocking the view of the inert scrying window behind him that showed nothing but the water behind its glass.

"I suppose that's up to me, then," Cathy commented as she gathered the sleeping girl into her arms, managing to do so without waking her up. "Maybe I'll encounter Marda on the way."

Kaion, a haggard-looking vampire and freshly-minted dungeon keeper, ducked his head as a throwing knife whistled past. Normally, he wouldn't even have bothered evading the tiny projectile, but without his coffin, an unfortunate hit would end him permanently. He floated upwards in a blur as two vampires rushed in his direction, exchanging furious blows and claw swipes as they did. The low wall surrounding the outer perimeter of the graveyard was brushed aside as if it was a mere hedge, and exploded into flying brick fragments. From out of the hip-high, wafting mist, a blue-glowing projectile streaked toward the two combatants, forcing them to jump apart.

Neither seemed inclined to continue the brawl, and both sped away to seek easier targets. Kaion had trouble tracking each and every participant in the huge free-for-all above the burial site, which made the already paranoid vampire even twitchier. Unfortunately, he couldn't leave. He just had to make it to his coffin and extract it before someone else claimed the graveyard, or even worse, it got destroyed in the fighting! There could be nothing more important!

A single, sharp spike of pain in his chest forced him to re-evaluate this assessment. He knew in some part of his mind that it could only have been sent by his dungeon heart. The vampire disappeared from the battle, reappearing within the empty chamber that held the pulsating, spherical object. The sight of the room made him want to tear out his hair in frustration and despair. What a great dungeon he lorded over. No rooms, no traps, and not even hallways belonged to him. Only the artefact itself was undeniably his, but without imps, he hadn't even managed to claim the territory around its pedestals. More importantly, he needed to find the intruder who had damaged the arcane device. The dungeon heart pulsed, entering its bright phase, and he almost shuddered when a shadow in the shape of a spider filled the entire ceiling, standing out sharply against the parts lit by the white glow. He whirled around and looked up at the crystal orb. A hairy, dog-sized spider lounged on top of the sphere, watching him through eight tiny eyes that glittered like rubies. Outraged, the Keeper transported aside the beast - the heart was his only territory, so he might as well use it - and kicked the offending thing off of its perch. The arachnid spun as it sailed through the air, but never made it to the ground. Suspended by a silk thread, it remained swinging from the ceiling like a pendulum.

"I must congratulate you for being the first of your brood to correctly identify the only dungeon heart here that matters," a hissing voice cut through the darkness when the red eyes focused on Kaion once more.

"What? Who are you, creature, and why did you defile my dungeon heart?"

"To summon you, of course," the possessed spider chirped, sounding amused despite the damage it had taken.

The vampire seemed mesmerized by the droplets of ichor that were running down its body and dripping onto the floor. "Why? And how did you get here?" Kaion demanded, still fuming quietly.

"To talk to you, of course, and I took a whale. Tell me, little Keeper, do you have any idea how to use that dungeon heart, or did you just rush into this headlong without stopping to think?" the eight-legged monster asked while Kaion was still trying to make sense of the second part of its answer.

"Of course I do! The Empe- Zarekos never made much of a secret about how he worked his magic. What do you take me for, a fool?"

The silence before the spider's answer was just a bit too long to be polite. "I see. Good. I propose an alliance, my dear. You look as if you could use all the help you can get."

Suddenly, the vampire was right in front of the monstrous creature, baring his fangs in anger. "Your attitude irks me greatly. Tell me why I shouldn't strike you down on the spot and feast on your blood instead!"

"I have money," the spider said simply.

Kaion lowered the clawed hand he had raised for an eviscerating strike, grimacing as if he'd just swallowed something vile. "I... see. We may be able to work out a deal."

"Most excellent!" the spider said, wriggling its legs. "Unfortunately, we will have to continue this discussion at a later date, since something has come up that requires my attention. In the meantime, feel free to sate your thirst on my minions." A black blur came loose from the arachnid, and the red glow in its eyes faded into a dull grey. Kaion thought he heard the shadow mutter the words 'bloody Baron' as it sped away, unimpeded by the walls.

Minions? What had it meant?

The vampire's ears picked up a soft rustling noise. A spider, just as big as the first one, skittered in from the entrance tunnel. A second crept out of the shadows near the ceiling, climbing down the wall. A

third and a fourth lowered themselves on thin threads, coming out from behind the pillars that had hidden them. Pitter-patter noises from the tunnels alerted him that more of the creatures were pouring in, and soon, he found himself with his back to his dungeon heart, surrounded on all sides by a sea of hairy, wriggling limbs and bulbous bodies. The spiders formed a circle around the artefact, as if afraid to advance fully into its light. The stare of their expressionless eyes never once strayed from the newly-minted Keeper as they clicked their mandibles in unison.

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Unauthorised Expedition

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Ami awoke feeling well-rested, and enjoyed the comfortable sensation of soft, warm covers surrounding her. Something nagged in the back of her mind, and it didn't take her long to figure out what. *My bedroom? I don't remember going to bed!* Too quickly, the memories of the previous night returned, and her eyes flew open in alarm. It was darker than usual in her chamber, and the corrupted picture of withered trees on the wall seemed to writhe with unholy life. *Right, torchlight. I haven't fixed the windmills yet,* she reminded herself before the sight could creep her out. She brushed the covers aside and put her feet over the edge of the bed, where they bumped into the boots of her Sailor Mercury uniform. The right one toppled, struck by her toes. Ami blinked in surprise and looked down at herself. She was still wearing the rest of the rumpled uniform that showed that it had been slept in. The blue-haired girl wrinkled her nose. Clearly, she hadn't taken a bath either.

"Mercury Power, Make Up!"

Aquamarine light flashed and whirled like ribbons around her as the transformation sequence compressed half an hour of personal hygiene and make-up into less than a second and replaced her worn uniform with a pristine new one. Ami stepped in front of the mirror to verify that she was presentable, hid a yawn behind her hand, and focused on where to find her advisers. Jadeite was in his room, sleeping. The blue-haired girl resisted the urge to take a closer look and searched for Cathy instead. She found the woman sitting together with Jered and Snyder around the table in the small living room, which was located in a part of the dungeon that was off-limits to the rank and file. Ami transported herself to its entrance and rapped her knuckles against the wooden door frame to announce herself. "Good morning," she greeted, smiling as she stepped inside.

The three faces that turned to look at her had dark rings under their eyes, indicating that their owners had gotten less sleep than the

young Keeper. Snyder nodded a greeting in her direction, and Jered raised his hand for a little wave.

"Morning, Mercury," Cathy said as she looked up from the plate on the table before her, which she had been staring at with a frown on her face. "Although it's almost time for lunch already, if you want some."

Ami didn't recognise the lump of whitish meat resting before the blonde. Steam rose from the warm chunk, condensing immediately into white droplets in the chill air. It didn't smell like fish or anything else that she was familiar with, though she could identify a hint of garlic in the aroma. "Um, what is it? I thought the larder was still flooded?"

"It is," the wavy-haired man sitting at his girlfriend's side said and gestured toward the food. "*That* is spider meat. The goblins are roasting the things on a spit up there in the entrance hall."

"Spider meat? Seriously?" Ami asked, inspecting the food more closely. A quick mental check of the wide entrance revealed that a bunch of green-skinned creatures had moved some benches up to the room and lit a large bonfire in the centre. A huge, sizzling spider rotated slowly over the flame as three goblins turned a crank. Others watched from the sidelines, lounging on chairs or on the ground, cheering, and jostling each other. They were fuelling the fire with pieces of smashed furniture, Ami saw. No other minions were anywhere close, which she suspected had something to do with the thick smoke that filled the room despite the storm howling outside, above the open hatch in the ceiling. Since the fat-dripping husk of the spider had been extremely hairy before being roasted, the smell in there had to be breathtaking right now.

"Yes. Spider. They assure me that it tastes just like crab. I am currently trying to decide whether or not I am hungry enough to find out if this is true." Jered prodded at the hunk of wobbly substance with the tip of one of his daggers experimentally.

"I don't think goblins are very discerning about what they eat," Cathy said, shuddering and drawing the blanket she had draped around her shoulders tighter. "I had to shoo that fat cook Brugli out of the

cell block. She was there with two of the 'health inspectors', carrying a butcher knife, and trying to decide which of the prisoners looked the most tender."

"Oh, you had a run-in with her too?" Snyder said, looking a bit green around the nose. "She showed up in the infirmary and asked me if I had performed any amputations lately, and if so, if she could have the severed parts."

"I- I'm not hungry any more," Jered commented as he shoved the plate with the meat away from him.

"Neither am I," Cathy added, while Snyder just nodded.

Ami herself was feeling queasy too. "I will get us something later," she promised, "In the meantime, is there something I should know about? What about those prisoners?"

"Not many. A few dark elves and bile demons that were too slow or too injured to flee through the portal when the dungeon heart went down." The blonde rummaged in the pockets of the blue trousers she was wearing underneath her version of the Sailor Mercury uniform, which was starting to show some wear and tear by now, and produced a jingling set of keys. "Without these, neither Brugli nor Tserk can get at them, so they should be safe for now."

"We have not been attacked either while you slept. Jadeite made a ferry for the reaperbots and the prisoners, but since the workshops are flooded too, we stashed them near the entrance. The goblin pilots are currently crawling over them, decorating them with war paint, and getting into brawls over whose reaperbot is best and who killed the most invaders. I'm just glad we don't have any alcohol to make the situation worse."

"That doesn't make sense," Ami said as she remotely watched the small green creatures climb over the bulky bodies, holding onto the smooth metal in ways that looked neither safe nor solid, and drew swirls and whiskers onto the black lacquer. Even as she watched, one goblin's fingers slid off of the rib they had been clinging to, and he dropped to the ground, landing with his head in the bucket of home-made red paint he had been holding with his teeth. "They are

all identical, and we link them to capsules at random! Didn't you tell them?"

"Let them have their fun. We need to patch those things up anyway, so anything those little bastards do to them will be fixed too," Jered said, sounding unconcerned. "Who knows, if they feel that a particular automaton belongs to them, they might take better care of it."

"It's not the automatons that I'm worried about," Ami said, watching as one goblin stepped onto the shoulders of another, who was in turn standing on a third's shoulders. This allowed his brush to reach the face of a particular damaged-looking reaperbot, but the entire tower was wobbling so much that most lines completely missed their target. The child-sized monster persevered, furrowing his brow in concentration and poking the tip of his tongue out as he swung the painting utensil. "I suppose letting them personalise their automatons won't hurt. I'll see to it that they'll be stored lying down and easily accessible in the future," Ami conceded. "Snyder, what about our wounded? Did we lose anyone?"

"No," the redhead shook his head, "but it was close in some cases. I treated three goblins and one warlock who had fallen victim to the ghost's life leeching attack, in addition to other combat-related injuries. There were also a number of trolls who had been clawed or cut, but those were surprisingly easy to fix. They appear to be hardy creatures and took well to the treatment. One goblin showed burn marks and refused to tell me where he got them, and some of the pilots have minor abrasions from their restraints. I assume that they were overzealous in their efforts to move the remote bodies."

"That's a relief," Ami said, and meant it. She didn't like the idea of someone dying in her service or to defend her. "I'll make sure to adjust the capsule design so this won't happen again. Good work! So everyone is out of danger now?"

"Well, yes, I would assume so. Nobody else requested my assistance after the fighting had ceased, therefore, they should all be in acceptable health, unless you are missing someone."

"While we are on the topic of missing people, do you know where

Marda is, Mercury? I haven't been able to find her since the battle ended," Cathy said. "Neither has anyone else."

"Marda is missing?" Well, that mystery could be solved easily enough. Ami concentrated on the female troll, focusing on discerning her location. The girl's expression turned into one of wide-eyed bewilderment. "Why is she on the mainland?"

Marda's metal-clad boots clattered loudly as she stomped through a darkened hall. Eight warhammer-wielding trolls followed in a double row behind their chainmail-clad leader, blurring like her from some kind of acceleration magic. "Someone is watching," the tall female growled through clenched teeth, raising her hand and prompting the others to follow her example and stop.

Does she mean me? Ami thought, observing with her Keeper powers.

"You have good senses, but then, all vermin does!" a female voice echoed through the hall, coming from the floor above. A pair of red eyes opened on the balcony overlooking part of the room. Pale hands rose from the railing, which had been decorated with vines. The vampire spread her arms, opening her cloak and appearing like a dark, slender silhouette before the brighter fabric of its interior. "I so rarely get visitors. You just *have* to stay for lunch."

"Spare me the melodrama, bloodsucker. Where is the mantle?" Marda interrupted,

The fabric draped over the vampire's limbs fluttered like bat wings as she jumped over the railing and descended, coming to a stop in mid-air. "You finally left your bolt-hole and came out all the way here for that? Fool! Your Keeper should have taken it off of Zarekos. No matter. This will be the last mistake you ever made!"

"Useless. Destroy her!" Marda ordered, leaping high to meet her female opponent in mid-air, hammer held high over her head. Her muscular soldiers spread out, attempting to flank the flying monster. A metal fan snapped open in the vampiric woman's hand, blocking

the descent of the warhammer with a loud clang. Her dainty fingers didn't as much as budge under the impact, but the heavy head of her opponent's weapon bounced back as if it had struck a wall. Unperturbed, Marda used the spin imparted by the bounce to somersault backward and lash out with an armoured boot at the monster's face. The vampire spat out a few syllables and erupted into a flare of red light that spread outward in a star shape from her body, slamming into her attackers like a tidal wave and flinging them into the walls.

Worried, Ami wondered whether or not she would have to intervene. *Those trolls didn't join up with me!* she realised when she attempted to pull one of the blurry shapes to its feet and couldn't.

"Oh ho ho ho! You do not match up to your reputation," the vampire gloated at the prone form on the ground, her cloak and black hair fluttering around her in an illusory breeze. "I don't see why Zarekos was so worri- Huh?" The fan lashed out, batting a rock aside that whistled toward her face. "Up for round two already? Fine, if you wish to die tired, I will be happy to oblige!" The bat-like female smirked at the troll who was barrelling down on her with her head held low, lightly-scorched chainmail jingling with each step. The following exchange of blows was more even, with the haft of the warhammer blocking claw swipes intended to maim and disembowel, and the war fan ringing out like a bell again and again as it blocked a hail of stikes and kicks. As a ground-based fighter, Marda was at a slight disadvantage compared to the floating vampire, who would retreat upward out of striking distance each time the troll's speed threatened to overwhelm her. "Why don't you give up already? Your resistance is futile. You will never be able to defeat me."

Marda glowered at her opponent, putting her enormous brows to good use frowning as she redoubled her efforts and forced the vampire to retreat higher up into the air once more. "I don't have to. I have allies."

Alarmed, the vampire spared the time to glance around, to see where the other trolls were - three back on their feet, three groaning on the floor, one- behind her! The fan swished through the air as the vampire spun like a top and blocked the jumping green creature's

hammer blow in the nick of time. The bat-like creature laughed. "You moron! That could have worked if you hadn't given-" A meaty crack sounded through the room as the eighth troll, jumping down from the balcony, smashed the floating woman's spine at the base of the neck.

"They can fly and still never look up," Marda commented as the body hit the floor, burst into smokeless flame and turned to ash. "Onwards. That one looked as if she had a dungeon heart. Let's find it."

"My Lord, do you think she was telling the truth?" one of the warriors asked as he fell in step behind his leader.

"Mercury doesn't have it. We would have known," the armoured greenskin said, grunting as she batted an attacking skeleton over the edge of a descending spiral staircase, where it disappeared into the darkness. "Keep looking."

Back in the dungeon, Ami frowned as she thought about the battle. Why had that vampire been utterly destroyed, rather than turning into the black sludge that faded away once the monster revived inside its coffin? She would need to find out. In addition, the kind of stone blocks constituting the complex that the trolls were rampaging through seemed familiar. When Ami checked its geographical location, she realised why. Zarekos' casting chamber was in the same place, which wasn't particularly far from the shore. Still, she doubted that Marda had just swum over there, through the stormy sea and wearing her armour.

"She's on the mainland? What is she doing there? And how did she get there?" Cathy shouted, taken aback by the new information long enough to forget about the cold.

"Fighting vampires and looking for some kind of mantle, it seems. As for the rest..." Ami shrugged. "I have no idea. I hope she doesn't want to claim a dungeon heart for herself. Do you think I should retrieve her?"

"I'd say you should observe her for a while longer and prepare a nice cell. That way, the two of you can have a long chat, without the rest of her troops finding out immediately," Jered advised. "I'm not sure we could handle a troll rebellion right now."

Ami nodded reluctantly, seeing the wisdom in preparing for the worst. "I'll only act if she tries to seize a dungeon heart then, or when I have learned enough. I really shouldn't put off that talk with Umbra much longer."

"Aw, can't that wait?" Cathy piped up in a pleading tone of voice. "I'd really appreciate it if you fixed the heating first!"

The blonde swordswoman had a good point, Ami considered as she appeared in the vaults of her treasury. Marda wasn't an immediate problem, and the dungeon was in dire need of repair. It was cold in this cave of ice, whose polished walls reflected the shine of the riches stored within a thousandfold. The blue-haired girl considered the contents of her treasury carefully over the clouds of condensing air escaping from her mouth. The piles of twinkling gold coins were smaller than she would have liked, despite the defeated Keeper's generous 'donation', and it would keep dwindling if the dungeon kept using it for basic warmth, lighting, and maintenance. Restoring electricity should be her first priority, then. Ami closed her red-glowing eyes and concentrated. On top of the iceberg, the stumps of the broken windmills shuddered and liquefied, turning into a greyish ooze that coalesced into a modest number of golden coins. The young Keeper quickly moved them to the treasury before the storm could blow them off the deck and into the raging sea. She snatched one of the round pieces out of the waterfall-like shower of coins in front of her, and inspected it more closely. Her face, proudly glittering on one of its sides, had its eyes closed and was frozen in the expression that she had displayed when the coin had been minted, so to speak. It was inconvenient that dungeon hearts could only convert structures that they had created back into gold - she had a lot of iceberg that she could have remodelled and sold off, otherwise - but in truth, it was a blessing in disguise. A Keeper who could simply disintegrate the landscape, fortifications, or even people, and turn them into more gold would be a nightmare. *I*

wonder if the hearts infuse what they make with their corruption in order to break it up later?

While that wasn't a comforting thought, Ami had no choice but to rely on the tools she was given. Like the corruption, she would just have to make the best of it and work around the limitations somehow. Gold disappeared from the chamber, and in turn, a single steel pillar mushroomed upward on the vessel's deck, sprouting three long blades that started rotating in the harsh winds. Satisfied with the way that the dungeon heart had implemented the stored pattern, Ami reconnected the broken cables with the new generator and waited. The electrical lights flickered for a moment and went out. "Darn it!" Where could the problem be? Oh, yes, short-circuit from all the rooms that were still underwater. Ami summoned her Mercury computer to have a look at the circuit layout, but stashed it away unopened after a moment of thought. Pumping all of the water out of the flooded rooms would take much time and effort. There was an easier solution if she just wanted to get rid of the problem with the wiring. The seawater that had seeped into the bowels of the ship started to froth and bubble as the furniture within the caverns disappeared along with the thin layer of stone that masked the ice and contained the wiring. Only bare, water-filled spaces and a few wet coins of gold remained, which quickly found their way into Ami's coffers. Unfortunately, their contents would not be enough to buy a new dungeon heart on the mainland. That meant she would have to fix the gem furnaces, which had taken quite a beating from the invading forces. The big metal cylinders had weathered the invasion almost intact, but the delicate machinery to heat, turn, and control them was littering the floor in broken, twisted pieces. *I'll have to salvage them and replace them,* Ami thought, *that will empty out my reserves even more. Will I even have enough left to run the reaperbots in case Marda's band turns on me?* The lonely girl dearly wished she was at home with her friends, or that she at least didn't have to worry about potential traitors. *It will take Jered a while to cook up a new batch of sapphires, so I - wait!* Ami hit her forehead with a smack. *I can just ask Jadeite to do it! If he can fix an entire ship with his glamour magic, a few furnaces shouldn't be a problem.* Grewing more exited, she continued that train of thought. *And if he can adjust things to his wishes, it shouldn't be hard for him to keep them at a specific temperature either! Maybe we can even up*

production! I hope he won't mind me asking that. Blushing faintly, the teenager risked another mental gaze into the dark general's bedroom, where only a patch of curly blond hair poked out from underneath the covers. *I suppose I should let him get his well-deserved rest first. Time to visit Umbra.*

A brownish-green imp squeaked in terror when it suddenly came face to face with a set of eight red-glowing eyes set over mandibles as long as its pickaxe. With a high-pitched scream, it dropped its backpack and sprinted away, with the giant spider in hot pursuit. It moved unlike a normal spider would, hopping with a strange, hound-like gait that four-legged animals would use, and stayed hot on the heels of the tiny, bug-eyed humanoid. The chase went through a library, where a shelf wobbled precariously after the arachnid bumped into it, past an empty treasury, and came to a sudden stop in front of a hen house. An unbelievably strong hand clamped down on the jumping spider's extended hind leg and lifted it into the air until the creatures was dangling upside-down and waving its hairy limbs.

"Arachne. Is there some particular reason why you are terrifying my minions?" Kaion asked, standing still like a statue amidst the chaos of flying feathers and clucking hens flapping their wings.

"Do I need one?" the upside-down spider chirped and clicked its mandibles, which probably was its equivalent to a laugh. "However, I like what you have done with *my* gold," an eerie, hissing voice came from the throat of the huge spider. "Nice design. Frugal and utilitarian. I particularly like the torture chamber. Very well equipped. You like knives, don't you? However, I can't help noticing that your portal has not attracted any creatures yet. And didn't you want a graveyard? I have not spotted one anywhere here."

"Zarekos never saw the need to expand the existing one in my presence," Kaion excused his failure, "so I never learned how to make one. I will be able to remedy this as soon as I seize one of his former bases from my erstwhile companions."

"I see. I may have a simpler solution," Arachne said, her tone

suddenly serious. "Listen well, I hate repeating myself."

"Oh?" the vampire leaned in closer, baring his fangs in a sceptical smirk as he cocked his head. "Is that so, my valued ally?"

"Yes. It goes like this: *Electrum Deus.*"

Cowering underneath a layer of frightened chickens, the imp quaked in terror as the room flashed with bright, bluish light, and loud thunder shook the walls.

"I don't have allies. I have minions," the spider hissed as it dropped into the pile of smoking ashes that was all that remained of Kaion's short career as a Keeper, the tip of one of its forelimbs still surrounded by crackling arcs of lightning. "Isn't that right, Nero?"

From the direction of the portal, a lanky man wearing a high-collared purple robes with a skull motif approached, followed by a large chest that walked on four human arms that had been nailed to its wood. His black goatee glistened oily in the torchlight as he bowed to the spider. "Of course, Mistress Arachne. This is the place? Quaint."

"I'm sure your assessment would hurt poor Kaion's feelings after he went through so much effort sparing us the trouble of researching all those rooms ourselves."

"My heart is bleeding for him. That's the dungeon heart?" the warlock asked, pointing at the pillar-framed crystal orb that had gone completely dark.

"Indeed. Why the sour face? This is your long-awaited promotion to subordinate Keeper. You should enjoy it! You are rising up in the Underworld!"

"For as long as you chose to support me, in a location that you don't feel like defending yourself," Nero muttered.

"Indeed! I always knew you were a smart boy. But fret not, if you manage to complete your task and assassinate that wretched Mercury, I will reward you with a *real* dungeon heart, not this ancient relic. Feel free to claim others if it serves you. Should you fail... well, you won't have to worry about me any longer."

"Delightful." Nero said in a deadpan tone of voice, staring with greedy eyes at the inert orb he would soon bond with.

Last edited: Sep 9, 2016

Umbra's Report

Originally on 2010-08-10T01:05:00

Ami sat in her throne, shifting left and right in order to find a more comfortable position on the large seat that was almost too big for her. With the way the armrests flared outward to mimic the crossbar section of the Mercury symbol, they could almost serve as desks. The blue-haired girl grinned for a moment as she played with the idea of storing books or sandwiches there, but that would ruin the dignified and intimidating impression it was supposed to evoke. The ostentatious piece of furniture was designed to draw attention to its occupant, something which Ami tended to avoid in normal circumstances. A small sigh escaped her lips as she leaned against the throne's rounded back, which was topped with two horn-like protrusions. Unfortunately, sometimes, appearances had to be maintained, in particular when dealing with youma. Idly, she worried whether she shouldn't change into her Keeper garb. The shortness of her senshi uniform's skirt felt as if it would draw attention of a different kind when she was sitting down. Ami decided that it didn't really matter, since the spacious throne room was empty right now and ready for a private audience. "Umbra. Appear before me!"

A poorly-defined volume of air in front of the throne went pitch-black, appearing as if all light had been sucked out of it. When the localised darkness lifted, it revealed a hooded figure that knelt in front of Ami. With her flowing black cloak and lanky build, Umbra resembled the vampires that haunted the continent. However, the blue skin and green eyes visible underneath the youma's hood made mistaking her for one unlikely. "Lady Mercury. I await your command."

If the youma noted the fine layer of dusty footprints, scratches, and dried blood that covered the mirrored floor and took away from the grandiose ambience, she didn't show. Here, the trolls and other minions had fought to prevent Zarekos' forces from advancing toward the reinforced door behind the throne, which lead to the critical parts of the dungeon, and the room still showed its battle

scars. Ami wished she still had imps that would clean up those blemishes. "Rise," she ordered, keeping her voice gentle. "Please report what you found out about the trolls."

"As you wish." Umbra's voice sounded like a whisper, but could be clearly heard and understood. "I managed to infiltrate their complex with little difficulty, since I could just teleport past the alarm wards hidden almost everywhere. From what I was able to observe, I conclude that their daily routine is rather bland. They spend most of their time praying over tiny gardens that are distributed throughout the caverns, usually where light seeps in through cracks in the ceiling."

"Praying? Are you sure about that?" Ami asked. It seemed like an uncharacteristic thing for trolls to do. But then, so was farming.

"That was what it sounded like. They kept muttering mantras as they worked. It could be that they were using a kind of magic that I am not familiar with to make the plants grow. I don't think the ground would be able to support as much greenery if their efforts didn't have some kind of effect."

"Go on," Ami encouraged the youma, her face thoughtful.

"As I said, that's what they spend most of their time with. That, training, and patrolling their domain. At mealtimes, there is frequent grumbling about the size of the rations. I assume that their community is barely able to sustain itself, though apparently the size of the portions increased recently. I assume that is because two thirds of the inhabitants are working for you now."

"Two thirds? Did you count them?"

"No, I but for every occupied cot, there seemed to be two empty ones." The youma wrinkled her nose. "Filthy things they were, made of stone, straw, and rags."

"Did you hear anything about Marda or me while you were listening in? Does it look as if they are hiding something?" So far, Ami hadn't heard anything too alarming yet. Interesting, perhaps, but not alarming.

"The ones left behind envy those that you have taken into your service. Understandable, since they are living in filth and poverty. Your dungeon is a palace in comparison, my Lady. They resent Marda for ordering them to remain behind and tend to the gardens, yet there is nary any mention of rebellion. They seem resigned to their fate, as if they were terrified of the consequences of turning against their leader."

"Terrified? I got the impression they respect her," Ami said.

Umbra blinked. "That's the same thing, isn't it? They treat her like youma would treat any of the dark generals."

"That's not really- never mind." Ami wasn't about to let herself be sidetracked by explaining the difference, even if it implied that the creature felt the same way about her. The reminder that many of her employees probably feared her did not sit well with her. "So they are not hiding anything?"

The standing youma's stance did not change, but she exuded less confidence than during the first part of her report. "There seems to be a part of the island that I was unable to enter," she confessed after a brief pause. "There is a dead end tunnel branching off from one of the deepest caves of the islands. It leads to a mural that consists of geometrical patterns, which is made from a brighter stone than the surrounding rock. Sometimes, there is a strange phenomenon wavering in the air in front of it. I find it hard to describe." The youma clicked her tongue as she searched for words. "It looks a bit like a keyhole-shaped mirror, but transparent and surrounded with intricate streamers, and it billows as if it had been drawn on an invisible sail."

"Was it some kind of portal?" Ami guessed from the context.

"Yes," Umbra nodded quickly. "I watched two trolls disappear into it. I waited until they returned, and then touched the same stones and recited the same formula as they had. However, the portal wouldn't let me in. I simply passed through it as if it wasn't even there. I apologise for my failure."

"Don't worry about it," Ami quickly reassured the youma, who was

bowing her head. "I can hardly expected you to be able to activate unknown artefacts. Can you describe the patterns on the wall?"

"I can do better than that," the relieved creature said and produced a scroll that couldn't possibly have fitted underneath her black cloak. Ami thought it was a roll of wallpaper at first, and in a way, she was right. "Here," Umbra said while she unrolled the paper, revealing a pattern in black and grey tones. "I used some charcoal and paper to make a print of it."

"Excellent." Ami's bright smile seemed to light up the room. "Good initiative, I like that!" The design reminded her of some of the warding patterns that she had seen Snyder draw, but these were unfamiliar to her. She found herself growing more excited. Unknown magic, especially magic related to travelling, was one of the things she hoped to discover on the Avatar Islands. Perhaps this discovery would be the first step in getting her home? She would have to quiz Marda about this eventually. "Umbra, did you discover anything else of interest?"

"Not much, my Lady, unless you are interested in the details of troll personal hygiene, or lack thereof. I noticed that in the absence of their leader, much of their discipline seems forgotten. They do not wash, they do not tidy their rooms, and they get into scuffles with the others near constantly, though it has never degenerated into violence while I watched."

"I see. Thank you for your report, Umbra." Ami dismissed the youma, who bowed as she disappeared back into the shadows. *So Marda bullies her troops into submission?* The teenager considered this unlikely. Yes, the chainmail-clad troll was probably strong enough to do so, but her underlings didn't act as if she ruled by strength alone. There had to be something else that unified them. Maybe that mysterious portal had something to do with it. And making plants grow by magic? So far, Ami hadn't thought of trolls as a species that was particularly adept at using magic, though Marda's warriors all seemed to know an acceleration spell, at least. Ami frowned as she let her eyes wander over the patterns on the scroll that the youma had left behind. Her fingers tapped an impatient rhythm on the stone of her left armrest. Perhaps the best way to sate her curiosity would be to ask Marda directly. What was her

wayward underling up to at the moment, anyway? A brief moment of concentration revealed her and her warriors still running through dark, undead-infested tunnels. Ami's stomach growled, reminding her that she had not eaten anything since she opted to forego the spider stew. Marda could wait a bit longer, she decided. Food would become a problem if she didn't do something soon, since the farms needed a few days to get producing, and the corrupted sea around here contained almost no fish. Bringing in food from a settlement on the western continent was the first thought that came to mind, but upon further reflection, she realised that she had an option that was more in line with her current plans. At once, a goblin with bandaged fingers appeared before her. Shifty eyes darted left and right in surprise at the suddenly changed environment before they focused on the friendly smile of the girl on the throne. "Beastmaster! Prepare to unleash the rats!"

Attention everyone! In a few moments, the dungeon will brush against the bottom of the ocean. Everyone brace for impact and hold on tight until the shaking subsides! Ami's mental warning rang loudly through the minds of everyone on the iceberg, alerting them to the jolts that were about to come.

As expected, the giant floating chunk of ice shuddered and groaned when its bottom burrowed into the sludge covering the gently ascending slope underneath the waves. The ice jerked several more times as the perpetual storm above it pushed it mercilessly ahead, albeit at a leisurely pace. Within the corridors, goblins stumbled and held onto the walls while in the library, books clattered on their shelves. With a final jerk, the dungeon came to a stop, wedged in place against the bottom of the sea by its own weight, not far from the coast of the Avatar Islands. Just as planned. Ami rubbed her hands together in anticipation. Just because she didn't have the funds to create a new dungeon heart didn't mean she couldn't use her existing one to grab some land. With a quick teleport, she appeared within the deepest chamber of her dungeon. The place was nothing but a bare, round chamber whose ice walls flared blue with the reflections of her teleport flash. Startled by the bright light, the hundreds of rats trapped within cages stashed all around the

place squeaked and whimpered as snowflakes whirled through the room.

"Keeper! Me brought them all, like you said!" the Beastmaster greeted, sitting on top of one of the cages and keeping her feet well out of range of the nipping snouts of the animals. "What we going to do?"

"I'm going to expand the dungeon to the mainland," Ami said as she walked to the centre of the room. "Your rats will help me claim the territory."

She raised her hand, and an imp appeared out of thin air, somersaulted, and flopped to the ground like a marionette with its strings cut. Its magical pick slipped from its limp fingers and clattered to the floor. Ami turned a few degrees to the left and repeated the procedure, producing another lifeless corpse. Wile the fuku-clad Keeper proceeded with creating more of the imp bodies in a circular pattern around her position, the Beastmaster slid off of her perch and approached one of the bug-eyed bodies to prod it cautiously with a toe. "Err, Keeper? Me not think this is working."

"Don't worry, I only need their picks," Ami assured him calmly. She raised both of her arms over her head and gestured, and all twelve tools rose into the air, circling her.

The watching goblin's eyes went wide. "Ohhhhh!" She cocked her head, and prodded the corpse once more. "I can have bodies, then? Feed pets, yes?"

Ami flinched at the suggestion and at the unbidden mental pictures it conjured up, and nearly lost her telekinetic control over the digging implements that were lining up in front of her. Still, rat chew was a better use of the corpses than just throwing them over board. "Okay, but do it somewhere where nobody will have to watch, please."

"Will do!"

Ami waved her hands as if she was conducting an orchestra, and the floating picks started biting into the ground as if they were being swung by a dozen skilled miners. The sounds of ice splintering and

cracking underneath their strikes took on a wet, muffled quality when they ran out of iceberg and dug into the ocean floor. The smell of mud and decay wafted up from the growing spiral ramp that Ami was driving into the earth. She would have to keep going deeper until she struck solid rock, and then she could dig a connection directly to the mainland with no fear of her tunnel collapsing.

"Please release the first cage full of rats," she ordered before floating upward to let the tide of grey-furred rodents pass. Excited to be free of their confinement, the animals scuttled around before diving into the newly dug-out passage. Programmed by their little backpacks, they performed a short dance on their hind legs whenever they encountered unclaimed territory. Each time, a few blue and white floor tiles formed on the newly-claimed area in a puff of smoke, expanding Ami's territory a tiny bit further. The teenager's lips curved upward in satisfaction at the rats' performance. As soon as her tunnel reached the former dungeon of the Keeper she had defeated earlier, she would release the rest of the animals and let them roam free so they could first claim the remaining infrastructure, and later the surrounding lands.The magic of the rooms wouldn't work for her incompatible dungeon heart, of course, but she could still recycle them to make a nice profit. Perhaps there would even be a library with some new books for her to pilfer before she sold it off. Most importantly, she would claim the local portal, which would allow her access to reinforcements, as well as to Underworld settlements where she could acquire food without all the logistical difficulties that inter-continental teleportation entailed.

Wielding her sledgehammer-like weapon like a golf club, Marda swung it a final time. The hammer's head struck the shrunken dungeon heart on the side with a loud pinging noise, ripped the damaged, head-sized artefact entirely off of its dais and hurled it against a pillar, where it burst into sharp-edged shards. Almost immediately, the remaining pillars groaned and shuddered as lightning arced away from the shattered sphere, striking them. Underneath the chainmail-clad troll's boots, the dungeon heart's dais crumbled. The tall creature kept her balance and raised her weapon in triumph as she rode down on the avalanche of crumbling stone,

heedless of the lightning and billowing dust behind her. "Ha, yes! One more down! I am feeling better already!"

"Hey, did you hear that too?" One of the other trolls, his skin grey from the dirt drifting through the air, pointed into the darkest corner of the room. His neighbour blurred into action and threw his hammer, which whirred as it spun through the air. The weapon embedded itself in the plaster of the wall, its haft humming from the impact.

The thrower walked over and pulled it out with a jerk. "Nothing here. Must have been one of the ghosts outside, here's a crack in the wall." The loincloth-clad warrior shoved a piece of rubble into the gap to make sure that nothing would sneak up on them and spat on the ground, shaking his head as he looked at the ruined dungeon heart. "Feels like such a waste."

Marda glowered at him, baring her uneven teeth. "All of Mukrezar's hearts must be destroyed. That is not debatable!"

"Yes, my Lord," the troll grumbled, looking away and muttering something through clenched teeth.

Unfortunately for him, his leader had good ears. "What was that?"

"I said we should just slip away back to the Underworld and get away from this mess," the creature said, crossing his arms and throwing a challenging look in Marda's direction.

Her answering laugh was a loud, unmelodious noise that rose from the back of her throat.

"Hey, it wouldn't be hard now," the troll continued, feeling more relieved than insulted by her reaction. "Zarekos' traps have died with him! We could get to a portal, fix it, and slip away before Mercury or anyone else notices!"

The female troll's laughter ceased abruptly. "You are a fool. Have you forgotten how you managed to survive these last fifteen years? How long do you think you could last in the Underworld before being found out?"

"Hmph. We'd just go back to how we lived before. Much more fun that way. Nobody would ever know."

"Fine. Let's assume that you are not found out. You live out an interesting and 'fun' life. And then you die. And the dark gods won't have forgotten," Marda stated slowly, relishing the other trolls suddenly frozen expression. "They won't care that you betrayed them out of necessity. Mercy has never been one of their strong points."

The reprimanded warrior's face paled into a yellowish green as certain unpleasant truths flickered through his mind, and his wide mouth became a thin, angry line.

"Why the sour face?" Marda mocked. "You knew that you would never be able to go back when you chose to follow me instead of starving miserably. You are mine, and nothing will change that!"

The troll's knuckles went white around the handle of his hammer, and for an instant, it looked as if he would lunge forward and try to punch Marda. The moment passed, and he seemed to deflate, slumping his shoulders in defeat. "It is as you say, my Lord."

"I still don't see how that mantle will help us," another troll broke the awkward silence. "Why are we even out here looking for it? Shouldn't we fall in line and avoid drawing Mercury's attention? She's not going to be any more pleased than-"

"Quiet!" Marda let her right arm whistle through the air in a horizontal arc as she shushed the others, and looked up at the ceiling. "She has just decided to turn her attention this way once more. Hello, Keeper. I took the liberty of advancing your agenda for you." The broad-nosed troll's waving right hand closed into a fist whose thumb pointed at the ruins behind her. "While you are listening in, do you think you could spare me the effort of walking back on my own?"

When Eline woke up, her head hurt as if her brain was trying to burst out through her forehead. Cold, rough floor tiles pressed into the alabaster skin of her legs and belly, adding to her discomfort. She

did not open her eyes just yet. Instead, her pointed ears twitched as she listened into the darkness and tried to figure out where she was and what was going on. The last thing she remembered was her brief and one-sided confrontation with the steel monstrosity that had fallen from the sky. Wait, there was one even newer memory: a hazy glimpse of the fiery clouds in the sky while ash and stone scraped her back and something strong dragged her across the wasteland. She was pretty sure that hadn't been a vampire, since her heart was still pumping blood through her veins. She must have been healed in the meantime, she figured, since her skin wasn't broken. It hadn't been a very thorough job though, considering her headache and the soreness of her muscles. Not that being healed was a good sign. Morrigan only did so for his most favoured minions, since he enjoyed seeing others in pain. Thus, logic stated that she had been captured by Keeper Mercury.

Eline dared opened her eyes. Keepers rarely healed their prisoners out of the goodness of their heart, in her experience, which meant that Mercury needed her strong enough to survive whatever tortures she had planned. A quick glance around revealed that she was alone in a barred cell, which was bare except for a bucket in the corner. The dark elf sat up silently, keeping her breathing even in order to avoid drawing attention, and tried to remember what she knew about the Keeper. Mercury's main claim to fame was defeating a horned reaper in single combat, even if Morrigan ranted often about how she had to have cheated. In Eline's head, the indistinct, blue-haired mental picture of the Keeper grew and gained bulging muscles, until it was nearly the equal of the reaper. What else did she know? Mercury had, according to rumours, had her way with the red-skinned beast against his will, which made her a terrifying and suicidal deviant. The red-eyed mental picture in the prisoner's mind gained a demented, lecherous grin. The Keeper's reported exhibitionist tendencies hardly mattered in comparison. Eline pinched the bridge of her nose as the brute in her imagination lost her clothes. *Just great. She's basically a female clone of Morrigan.* If the two were as similar as they sounded, then Eline's best option for getting out of this relatively unscathed would be taking off her bra and shoving her tits in the Keeper's face at the first opportunity. Her fingers played with the clasp that held the skimpy piece of clothing together, but retreated. Not out of any concern for her modesty, but

because it was cold here. Unfortunately, the frigid air that could brush over her skin nearly unimpeded by the black straps of leather that constituted her outfit wasn't the most discomforting thing in this place. The horrible, offensive stench of bile demons wafted over from a cell that Eline couldn't see into, along with their deep, warbling voice.

"No, no. No. Nooo! Keep that away from me!" one of them whimpered, while the other started shaking so hard that Eline could hear the fat wobble all the way through the wall. This did nothing to put her worries to rest.

"So the rumours about Mercury were true!" the first voice continued through clattering teeth. "She really did that, and to her own minions, too! Truly, she is wicked to the core!"

"Shut up! Is just soap!" A squeaky voice interrupted, prompting a muffled sob from the bile demon, and chains rattled as if someone was trying desperately to get away. "Yuk, where bucket? Need more water!"

Eline could hear something slosh as light footsteps moved behind the corner. That sounded like goblins. What in the Darkness' name were they doing, trying to wash bile demons?

"Stay away from me! Tell Mercury I'll talk," the second voice pleaded as poorly-oiled door hinges groaned. "I'll tell her everything I know!"

"Not her idea," the goblin said cherfully.

"Then why are you doing this?"

"We health inspectors!" four goblins proudly proclaimed at once.

"Also, we bored," one added. "Brugli not cooking in kitchen today."

"Are you even allowed to do this?" the first gravelly voice asked, desperate to find a way out of this.

"Asked Commander. She thought good idea. Even gave me key!"

"She hate filth," a different goblin confirmed. "Big ones all do.

Chewed me out for silly thing like smearing earwax on tablecloth, even. Now you hold still!"

"Noooooooo!"

Loud splashes and maniac giggles, followed by scrubbing noises and howls of protest echoed through the cell block as the little creatures went to work. Eline wished them luck, and hoped that they would be very thorough. Bile demons were disgusting things, and anything that lessened their rotten smell was good in her book. Besides, the longer they were busy with the red bags of lard, the less likely it was that they'd come after her next.

A lost soap bubble drifted through the corridor outside of the dark elf's cell, and she watched it with great attention, hoping to catch a glimpse of her surroundings in the reflecting on the shimmering sphere. Even some information about the layout of this place could be useful if she ever got free. If Mercury let her minions have fun with her prisoners... A rattling noise in the previously unoccupied cell face-to-face with Eline's shook her out of her morose thoughts. The unusual sight of a large troll clad entirely in chainmail greeted her. The creature, sitting on the ground after an awkward landing, was holding a long-handled hammer in her right hand. She, for the armour bulged prominently in the chest area, surveyed her surroundings with a bemused expression, and didn't even have the good sense to look worried when she said, mostly to herself "Ah. I think I have just found the limits of the little Keeper's tolerance, then."

Last edited: Sep 16, 2016

Chatting with Marda

Originally on 2010-08-15T16:15:00

Ami sat in the living room, looking down at the wooden table before her and wringing her hands. "Do you think I overreacted?"

"All you did was dump her in a cell," Cathy said. The blonde was sitting sideways on her own chair and tapping the glass of water in front of her with her fingertips, making soft ringing noises. "If it had been up to me, I'd have done that a long time ago, for her attitude alone." The scar-faced woman took a long sip before continuing "But then, I'm not a Keeper. I'm sure other Keepers would have been much more merciful and lenient."

"Sarcasm aside, you made sure that everyone in a command position learned the spell for communicating telepathically," Jered pointed out, looking at Mercury while his fingers unconsciously played with his dagger-filled bandoleer. "If she wants her troops to break her out, they probably will. Justified imprisonment or not, this situation could turn volatile quickly."

Ami sighed. "I know. We should have some time to resolve this peacefully, at least. Most of the trolls have gone through the new portal to buy provisions in the Underworld. They won't be back for a while yet." Her Keeper sight revealed that the band of greenskins was in no particular hurry to complete their task, and she could hardly blame them for being sidetracked and wanting to spend their wages after living in complete poverty for over a decade. Even less so since their distraction worked to her advantage. Two bone tankards met with a loud clatter, spilling beer over the green fingers holding them before emptying the yellow liquid into wide-open mouths. Three more trolls were sitting on a bench, holding their own drinks and rocking left and right as they bellowed a bawdy song together with the other patrons. In a different establishment, the trolls were leering at dancers of various species shedding their clothes on stage. Ami's ears burned from just the few bits of conversation she picked up. The inebriated trolls were

enthusiastically comparing the assets of the trollish dancers to those of Marda, in a way that would have earned them at least a beating from their leader. With a light cough, Ami continued "I just hope they don't forget to bring the food I sent them out for. In any case, they won't get in the way right now."

"A good enough reason to talk with Marda right now," Cathy suggested. "No time like the present."

"Would you mind getting a little closer to the door? Pretty please?"

Eline pressed her back harder against the wall, keeping well out of range of the probing appendages reaching for her through the metal bars blocking the exit from her cell. "Not a chance! Go away!"

Tserk rattled the bars a bit for effect and quivered as he slid across the corridor and toward Marda's cell. The chainmail-clad troll didn't even look up. "Don't even think about it." The appendages slithering in the direction of the female troll hesitated, then froze as three pairs of eyes focused on the warhammer resting at her side. The pulsating mass of tentacles let out a disappointed bubbling noise and slumped down into a flatter shape.

"Sooo," Eline said, looking at Marda, "is that thing just going to stay there?"

"Don't know. Don't care."

For some reason, the dark elf took the troll's grunt as encouragement. "Say, you are one of Mercury's minions, right? What did you do to piss her off?"

"Oh, some lip here, some insubordination there. I think what really ticked her off was destroying an unclaimed dungeon heart recently."

"What? You have to be kidding me! Morrigan would have you flayed for any of those offences! How comes you aren't in a torture chamber right now?" the dark elf shouted, almost taking a step forward. Only the presence of the tentacle monster lying in front of the cell like a guard dog held her back.

Marda shrugged her shoulders. "Eh. She doesn't have one. Seems a bit light on enforcing discipline, to be honest. I haven't even seen her slap anyone yet. I get the feeling that she isn't really enjoying most of the Keeper perks. She seems more suited for a warlock role, if you ask me. Always reading and tinkering with strange things when nothing else demands her attention."

"Why did she become a Keeper, then?"

"Nepotism, I assume. Some relative probably wanted her out of his hair and sent her over here to the Avatar Islands. She has a regular income that I haven't managed to track to its source yet - a stipend from some patron would explain it handily." Marda furrowed her huge brows, irritated at her lack of accurate information.

"Well, I wouldn't want to be in your place, anyway." Eline fell silent for a bit. "Err, do you know what she has planned for me?"

At that moment, the conversation was interrupted by four annoyed-looking goblins coming around the corner, green skins glistening wet with foam and water. They were carrying cleaning utensils and zeroed in on the inert form on Tserk.

"You!" the foremost goblin yelled, pointing an angry finger at the wriggling mass with enough enthusiasm that water splashed out of the bucket he was holding in the other hand.

Three eyes half-opened, expressing mild interest. *"Me?"*

"You got slime all over floor! We just cleaned, too!"

"So what?"

"We got to clean again!"

"Yeah. Not fun!"

"Not my problem."

"Yes, is! We scrub you clean now so no more drip slime!"

Tserk let out a snort as the first goblin charged him with a maniac

grin, holding soap in one hand and a wet sponge in the other. Did they really think they could challenge *him*? A closer look at the sullied mop that one of the rearmost humanoids was holding like a lance made him reconsider. They had just finished washing the bile demons with that equipment, right? That water in their buckets didn't look all that fresh any more, either. Yes, victory was almost assured, but it would be a thoroughly disgusting experience. Sometimes, discretion was the better part of valour.

"It fleeing! Get it!"

As the tentacle monster started to retreat, a blue flash lit up the dungeon, reflecting off of the slimy layer covering the smooth floor tiles where the creature had passed. A slender silhouette appeared, not much taller than the goblins, and veiled by the swirling snow in the air. None of the four lunging greenskins managed to react to the obstacle that had so unexpectedly appeared in their path in time. Stopping was never an option.

"Mard- Ack!" Ami had barely opened her mouth when something barrelled into her. Soap stung in her eyes as a gush of water washed over her, preventing her from bracing for the following bumps and jostles. With each goblin crashing into her, she felt herself slide faster away from the cell. Equipment clattered to the ground around her as she put a foot forward to steady herself, but her boots found no purchase on the floor that was slick with soapy water and slime.

Eline blinked as the girl who had appeared out of nowhere skidded toward the tentacle monster after colliding with the 'health inspectors', waving her arms as she fought to maintain her balance. The beast, while surprised by this development, did not seem displeased. It stopped and extended a few of its appendages to catch the teenager, serving as a kind of cushion. The dark elf snickered when the girl's upper body disappeared within the mass of pseudopodia. The snickers increased into full-blown laughter when she sank in up to her rump, which wasn't covered at all by that ridiculously short blue skirt in this position, and her legs started kicking as she struggled to get out. The dark elf didn't even notice the expressions of pure terror that had appeared on the goblins' faces as they dropped whatever they were holding and sprinted in

the opposite direction. By now, the girl had managed to disentangle herself from the tentacle monster somehow - it had disappeared, at any rate. "Bwahaha, nice helmet, girl!" Eline pointed at the bucket put over Ami's head that blocked her sight. "Hey troll," she snorted, "who's that clumsy sorceress? She should try for a career as a comedian!" The pointy-eared woman's sharp eyes could make out a series of symbols along the collar of the girl's strange outfit when she raised both arms to lift the bucket off of her head. Let's see, a large black skull with horns - advanced necromancy, it seemed. Matching it on the other side was a black disc with eight tiny flames arranged around it in a regular pattern. A dark sun? Not a symbol she was familiar with. There was the elongated u-shape resembling a beaker that stood for a master alchemist, and the spiral for an initiate of space-warping magic. Eline nodded. She had seen the girl teleport in, and it explained what had happened to the monster hugging her. It looked as if there were even more symbols, past the shoulders and on the back, but the dark elf couldn't see them from her position. In any case, despite her unimposing stature, this young woman had to be a nasty piece of work if she knew that much magic.

"Oh. Her. That's just Keeper Mercury," Marda stated in a deadpan tone of voice.

"Wha- oh crap." Eline choked on her laughter, and her knees shook so hard that they clattered together when Ami lifted the bucket high enough that her red-blazing eyes became visible underneath the rim. They shone bright enough to remain visible even through the roaring pillar of water that appeared and enveloped Mercury like a swirling aura. The rotating column of water washed off the filth and slime and disappeared as abruptly as it had arrived.

Dripping wet, Ami brushed her blue bangs out of her face and shot a dark look in the elven prisoner's direction. Even if the scantily-clad woman couldn't pale because her skin was almost snow-white already, she looked as if she'd faint any moment now. Ami turned to Marda, her frown deepening. A moment later, both she and the armoured troll were gone, but the creature's weapon remained behind.

Eline's back slid down the wall as her legs gave out under her.

Staring at the puddle of water outside in horror, she muttered "Damn it! Me and my big mouth!"

Possession was such a useful spell, but Ami had never expected that she would be using it to solve the comparatively minor problem of being wet and cold and not having time to get changed. Out of Tiger's eyes she glared at Marda, who was occupying the mentally damaged youma's cell for the moment.

"Well, this is certainly an upgrade from my previous quarters," the broad-nosed troll said while brushing her fingers over the padded wall curtains.

"Marda. I want some answers," Ami began without preamble, ignoring the mutter that sounded suspiciously like 'no doubt'. "What were you doing out there on the continent?"

"Removing temptation. I can't allow you to make the mistake of claiming dungeon hearts that I have to smash to lift my curse, can I?" Marda smiled with fake innocence.

"You should have consulted me first! I wasn't going to claim any of those dungeon hearts anyway! Not only didn't you have the authority to make that decision for me, going out there on your own was also dangerous!"

"Feh. I'm not one of your wimpy goblins or warlocks. Without having to worry about Zarekos throwing groups of vampires at me at once, I can pretty much do what I want. Also, let's be perfectly clear about something here." Marda's face went stony, all friendliness fleeing from her features. "I have all the authority I need to make my own decisions. My trolls are loyal to me, not you, and are all highly-skilled veterans. Your sorry band of goblins and warlocks would be no match for them. And even if you somehow did the impossible and fended them off, you would be left with almost no forces in hostile territory, rife for the picking by any of your enemies. So don't try to intimidate or pull rank on me. You need me, and we both know it. I cooperate because it benefits me, not out of fear."

Ami tried to hide her worry behind an emotionless mask. This wasn't going as she had hoped. Well, she had a trump card to play. She just hoped this worked. Failing that, she'd only have the option to resort to one of Jadeite's mind-control headbands, and that would end all hopes of trying to resolve this situation peacefully. Trying to sound confident, she said. "Are you aware that most of those warriors you are relying on as insurance are currently in the Underworld and nowhere near my dungeon?"

The female troll barked out a short laugh. "A temporary condition, at best. Besides, you wouldn't want them to leak that you only have a flawed dungeon heart, do you?"

Now it was Ami's turn to blink. "Flawed? What do you mean?"

"Oh, come on. It's obvious to anyone who is smarter than a goblin that you cannot make imps. The warlocks may not care as long as you pay their wages and keep them comfortable and busy, but others? Some creatures really like their servants, and who in their right mind would want to work for a crippled Keeper if there was a better alternative? If this gets out, you are *finished.*" Marda allowed herself a smug grin as Mercury clenched her teeth. "Thus, you'll also have to excuse me for not believing you when you say you wouldn't love to get your hands on one of Zarekos' dungeon hearts. Why wouldn't you attempt to remove such a deficiency if you had the opportunity?"

"I got myself into more trouble than you could imagine for claiming dungeon hearts that belonged to other Keepers," Ami said with a dismissive wave of her hand. "There is no way that I would risk that again. Besides, you are assuming that I cannot fix that so-called flaw on my own. I could create a standard dungeon heart just fine if I cared to, but I have reasons not to. Anyway, this isn't about me. How did you even get to the coast that fast?"

"You aren't the only one who knows how to use travelling magic."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"I think it does."

Both stared at each other through the bars, crimson eyes meeting cold black ones. After a while, Ami asked "Does it have anything to do with that portal on your island?"

That drew a startled blink from the armoured troll, and she gripped the bars of the cell with both hands. "How did- Oh, whatever. So how does it feel knowing that the most potent military force in this place isn't under your direct control and can rapidly move about in mysterious ways, maybe even into places you don't want them to?" The troll's grin was back in full force now. "So why don't you let me out of here, and we decide to forget about this unpleasantness? Except for the part where you are stuck with me until my curse is lifted, naturally. I did nothing more than ensure that you kept to your part of our agreement, after all." From the expression on the teenager's face, Marda concluded that she was about to cave in.

A sudden inversion of the lighting in a corner of the room, similar to a flash of darkness, deposited a new arrival in the room and broke the tense silence.

"Lady Mercury," Umbra said, bowing her head and sinking to one knee. If it disturbed her that Mercury was possessing a fellow youma, she didn't show. "Please excuse me for listening in, but this creature is not forthcoming with the whole truth."

"Umbra?" Ami motioned the youma to get up. "What are you talking about?"

The hooded youma pointed her thumb at Marda. "Since you seemed interested in her and did not assign me any other tasks, I decided to spy on her after our audience. I learned some interesting things, at great risk. Someone even threw a hammer at me."

"Oh?" Ami glanced over at Marda. Did she look nervous all of a sudden? "Please go on."

"As you wish, my Lady. That troll was searching for something she identified as a 'mantle' within the ruins, turning her attention to the dungeon heart only as a secondary concern."

"Why, you sneaky little-" the prisoner growled, glaring at the black

form of the youma. "I won't forget this."

"Mantle? What is she talking about?" Ami asked.

Marda pondered the question for a while. "Very well, since I stand to learn something from this as well, I shall answer. The magical mantle Zarekos was wearing. What happened to it?"

"Zarekos' mantle?" *What does she want with that?* "It was red with runes, right?" At Marda's nod, she continued. "I think he was wearing it when I attacked him, but I can't be sure. I wasn't too concerned with his wardrobe at the time."

"What happened to it?"

"I don't know, he just caught fire the moment we appeared over the ocean. Maybe it burnt?"

"I doubt that. It's more durable than that," the chainmail-clad troll dismissed the possibility out of hand. "It should have remained behind. He must have put some arcane trigger on it that retrieved if it got lost."

For a moment, Ami could hear the troll's teeth grind in anger, but the look of fury on the creature's face passed as soon as it had come. Its intensity was enough to make the young Keeper very uncomfortable, though. "Um, I'm sure we can retrieve it somehow," she said in an attempt to calm Marda down. "What do you need it for?"

"It's possibly a shortcut for removing my curse," the troll admitted.

"Only possibly?"

"Well, I don't know whether Zarekos has customised it to better suit his needs or not. In any case, it's an opportunity I don't intend to pass up."

"I can live with that," Ami said, inclining her head in a shallow nod. *But you aren't getting your fingers on it before I have scanned it quite thoroughly.*

"Ahem, there was another thing," Umbra interrupted, sounding almost gleeful. Marda narrowed her eyes at the cloaked creature. "She mentioned that she and the other trolls betrayed their dark gods," the youma proclaimed with a smirk of triumph on her face, head angled so that only Marda could see it.

"Marda! Wait! WAIT! I have no problem with that!" Ami shouted at the verge of panic when she felt the troll's connection to the dungeon heart strain and fray in reaction to Umbra's proclamation. "Calm down! You have nothing to fear from me!"

"Explain!" Marda's bond with the dungeon heart hummed from the tension, hovering at the edge of ripping apart.

"I- Snyder!"

The redhead, dressed in white robes with a red overcoat, blinked in surprise when he suddenly found himself in a different location. Bereft of the chair supporting his weight, he succumbed to gravity and crashed to the ground. "Ouch! Mercury? What is the emergency?" he asked as he looked up her towering orange-skinned and green-haired form. Well, not all that orange any more, and the strawy green hair looked more teal than it used to.

"Snyder. Sorry about that." Ami reached down and took the acolyte's hand, pulling him to his feet. "Quickly, show Marda."

Puzzled, Snyder turned in the direction that Mercury was pointing at, and boggled at the sight of an angry Marda behind bars. "Well, err, certainly. What am I supposed to show her?"

"Just demonstrate your healing spells. Make it flashy, please." Ami could feel Marda's grip on the dungeon heart link slacken somewhat as she peered at the acolyte's hands with interest, but she would still be able to snap it at a moment's notice. "Umbra, you are dismissed. Please go to the command centre and assist the warlocks with spying on my enemies."

The youma wrapped herself in darkness and disappeared, obviously glad to escape from the bright light that had appeared around Snyder's hands. Ami also cringed away from the glow, which was

triggering her flight reflexes. With an exertion of will, she resisted and squinted through the glare and saw Marda watch, cocking her head in wonder.

"That's enough, Snyder," Ami instructed once she was sure that the troll was no longer trying to break her minion bond. "Thank you."

"You are welcome. What exactly was the purpose of this, if you do not mind me asking?"

"I was just demonstrating to Marda that I have no problem with Light worshippers working for me."

Snyder suddenly looked nervous. "Ah, is it wise to divulge that to...?" he asked with a sideways glance at the imprisoned greenskin.

"Don't worry, I'm sure Marda won't hold it against you." Ami paused and watched the thoughtful-looking troll intently. "Since she is one too."

Snyder sucked in a sharp breathe in surprise. "Wha- she is? But she is a troll!" The acolyte moved his hands up and down, indicating Marda's figure, as if that was necessary.

"So? You are not a fallen priest, and you are still serving a Keeper! In a dungeon that has a temple to the dark gods, no less! That's at least as unusual!" the armoured figure shot back.

"No, well, what I mean is, why is a troll - wait, she is not the only one is she? Why would trolls worship the Light?"

"You'd be surprised at what the threat of starvation and vampires sucking out your blood can motivate you to do," Marda answered.

"What I mean," Snyder started again, "how did you even know what to do? I cannot imagine that the proper code of conduct is taught wherever you come from."

"Oh, it's not as if the rules are particularly hard to figure out," the troll sneered, waving her gauntleted hand dismissively. "Pray a lot and figure out what you'd want to do in any given situation, then do the exact opposite!"

"Ah, I'm not sure this is the right attitude to-"

"Anyway," Ami interrupted, heading off the budding theological debate, "is there something you want to add now that you know that I won't hold it against you, Marda?" The cell door creaked as it opened to let the troll out.

"Fine, I suppose since you already know about us, it won't hurt to tell you," Marda conceded. "The mantle I'm looking for used to belong to the Avatar. It was supposed to act like a mobile temple to the Light gods, protecting the wearer as he carried their power even into the deepest darkness. With such a thing, even the temples of the dark gods themselves could have been assaulted directly."

"But Zarekos was wearing that. Why didn't it slay him instantly?" Ami asked.

"He desecrated it. I don't know what benefits he reaped from it, and I don't particularly care. I was hoping to purify it and use it to cure myself."

"I see." Ami nodded, and her borrowed features twisted into a friendly, short-fanged smile. "Very well then, I'll see if we can't find it for you. I hope we can work together better now that everything is out in the open!"

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Generals Plot

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"That's *him*!" a light blue youma with bird wings for ears hissed when she spotted a grey-uniformed, long-haired man in the distant haze. Traffic on the wide street winding underneath a dim, close, and violet sky froze as more of the beings turned their head in the indicated direction. Conversations ceased and expressions turned carefully neutral as the youma recognised the dark general and his companions. He had visited this part of the Dark Kingdom a lot recently.

"Inquisitors with him. Again." a figure in the shadows said, but the first speaker had already vacated the premises, slinking away into one of the anthill-like buildings made of strangely organic-looking rock that lined this part of the road.

With a cold expression on his face, Nephrite strode through the crowd that gave him a wide berth. He was all too aware of the furtive glances and fearful whispers that accompanied him wherever he went. Most of the youma retreated from the circles of light surrounding the crystal-topped columns that framed the avenue like trees, thinking that he could not see them scowling at him from the shadows. The dark general frowned. He was not here for them today. Perhaps soon. "That way," he ordered his companions, whose varied and mismatched clothing fit right in with regular Dark Kingdom fashion, except for the red tiaras that all of them were wearing. He was pointing at the entrance of a cave that led to the dwellings below and resembled the open mouth of a dragon. With its irregular, flowing lines, the architecture almost looked as if it was carved from runny wax. "The stars know everything," the long-haired general intoned. "In particular, they know that conspirators are meeting in this building right now. Drag them out for me, will you?"

Immediately, the five winged females and one male saluted and

rushed up the narrow staircase leading up to the entrance, disciplined enough to not get in each others way and moving in complete silence.

The lamp, a milky crystal set into the blue-shimmering rock of the ceiling, was barely bright enough to illuminate the three figures sitting around the table directly underneath it. Its light faded away even before it could reach the walls, which was just what trio wanted. No faint glowing line underneath the door would betray their presence.

"No, it's true! They aren't just investigating people at random. I have collected the data and discerned a pattern," a green-skinned youma said, slamming her palm down on the table. Her blue eyes were too large for her face and gave her a bug-like appearance. "Those arseholes are targeting us specifically!"

"Us? You mean those who served in general Jadeite's forces?" a broad youma who resembled a humanoid toad asked. He shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

"Of course that's what I mean! What else would the three of us have in common?"

"You may be on to sssomething. Have any of you heard from Myak and Terusse lately? I think they may have disssappeared too!" the third youma hissed. She couldn't help it, since her forked tongue and protruding fangs didn't allow her to form the words properly.

"That settles it," the first speaker said. "We need to do something to protect ourselves! I don't want to be questioned by Nephrite's goons just because we have no more general to look out for us!"

The frog-like youma's yellow eyes shone as he spoke. "You have nothing to fear if you have nothing to hide," he repeated the official position of the kingdom in regard to the inquisition, sounding dubious. Nobody had ever accused him of anything, least of all of being smart.

"Yeaaaah, right," the first youma drawled. Even if it was true by some miracle, what youma wouldn't be involved in something he or she didn't want to come out? "Oh, sure, they may return you when they are done with you," the large-eyed creature conceded, "but I have spoken with some of the prisoners they released. Their personality was nothing like it was before! It's like talking to completely different person!"

The room's occupants fell quiet, brooding in sombre silence. Finally, the scaly youma spoke up. "Sssso, what can we do? We can't jussst sssit quietly until they come for usss."

"I agree completely. We need to fight back, but we can't do it alone. We-"

She was rudely interrupted by the door shattering, perforated in three spots by large, electrically-charged tentacles that flashed toward the sitting youma. As soon as the green attack coming for her struck, she convulsed and turned into dust.

"Dammit, Galli! Too much power! Nephrite wanted all of them alive!" One of the shadowy youma that had accompanied the dark general shouted, glaring at her companion.

The target of her ire shrugged her shoulders, which sent a ripple through her elongated arms that were still wrapped around the pile of youma dust. "Bah, at least we got the others." She glared at the unconscious figures hanging limply in the rubber-like arms of the other members of the inquisitorial team. "Secure them and take them back. I want to get to the fun part!"

"Oh, yes," a youma in the back giggled. "Want to bet whether or not they'll still be alive after the Queen is done with them?"

The six figures left, taking their unfortunate captives with them. Long after they were gone, the forgotten pile of dust shuddered and shifted, and a tiny hand poked out through its side. A miniature version of the green-skinned youma crawled out, hatred gleaming in her too-large eyes.

Nephrite was quite satisfied with himself. His powers of astrology made uncovering clandestine plots *easy*. While he hadn't uncovered any treason involving Jadeite or the sailor senshi yet, he had managed to foil a plot to assassinate one of Queen Beryl's favourite youma. That had put him back in the evil monarch's good books, much to the displeasure of Zoisite. Oh yes, life was good. Except for one nagging little detail. The dark general blasted a bottle of ink that hadn't been on his desk when he had left, and was entirely unsurprised when the resulting splash of dark liquid frothed and bubbled, releasing toxic fumes as it ate its way through his paperwork. The constant assassination attempts since he had taken this job were becoming tiresome. As an investigator who was actually competent at discovering out power-grabbing schemes and intrigues, he was giving most of the youma nightmares. The less scrupulous or simply more terrified ones felt that the best solution was getting rid of him, and made more work for him in the process. Fortunately, he could avoid all of this trouble simply by hanging out in his Tokyo mansion, as most youma were unable to reach Earth under their own power. With a smug grin, the wavy-haired general disappeared for some rest and relaxation.

Zoisite was in a foul mood. Not only had he not been able to locate Kunzite for some days now, but Nephrite had somehow weaseled his way into Queen Beryl's good graces, and to top it all off, Sailor Moon was currently trying her best to take his head off with her moon tiara. The dark general dove behind the counter, almost losing his ponytail to the spinning disc. Behind him, a large banner proclaiming 'Grand Opening' tumbled to the ground, cut in two by the magical projectile. "Hey! Aren't you supposed to give some sort of speech before you attack?"

"You don't deserve a speech!" the angry voice of Sailor Moon shouted back. "You are the lowest of the low! I was so looking forward to free ice cream, too, but you had to ruin it! In the name of the Moon, I will punish you!"

"Uh," the carrot-themed youma, who had previously been masquerading as a waitress, chimed in. "I think I still have some around here. If you want some, you can have it!"

Sailor Moon let her gaze wander slowly over the interior of the parlour, which was littered with unconscious customers, before staring at the cone-headed youma through half-lidded eyes. "I may not be the quickest thinker around, but just how stupid do you think I am? Moon Tiara Action!"

The youma darted out of the way, coming face to face with her superior as she joined him behind cover. "What do we do now? Should we attack?"

"What do you think?" Zoisite muttered as a glowing disc tore like a buzz saw through the obstacle behind which they were hiding. It pinged off of one of the metal vats holding ice cream, dislodging it and dropping it on the cowering monster's head. *Note to self: ice-cream parlours are off the target list from now on.*

The dazed youma actually had to consider the question for a while, prompting the brownish-blonde-haired general to lower his opinion of his current underling even more. "Um. No?" She said, blissfully ignorant that her superior seriously contemplated just shoving her out into the senshi's line of fire to get it over with.

Zoisite pouted. Why was he forced to work with morons like this? Oh, right, because Queen Beryl thought that it was a splendid idea to assign him a youma at random just before the mission in order to make sure it wasn't compromised by the traitors. That kind of harebrained scheme had to be one of Nephrite's suggestions. He just knew it.

The automatic doorbell rung twice as the other two rushed in, which meant that this energy harvesting operation was thoroughly ruined. By now, Zoisite was almost willing to believe in that pro-senshi conspiracy that Queen Beryl assumed to exist. How else could they keep discovering his plots so easily? Fortunately, the Queen was cutting him some slack due to the additional difficulties the traitors introduced. Still, she wouldn't put up with his failures forever. There was only so much that Kunzite could do to deflect her wrath, when he was around in the first place. It was so unfair! The pony-tailed general pouted some more until a brilliant idea flickered through his brain. He would prove that he was better than Nephrite by unravelling this conspiracy first! His rival was approaching the

problem entirely the wrong way. Why interrogate countless youma if you only had to interrogate one senshi? Of course, catching one *could* be a bit tricky, the youngest of the four generals admitted. Fortunately, Nephrite would unwittingly help him with that. Zoisite smiled as his newest scheme crystallised in his mind. Even if it failed, it would inconvenience his rival, which was a net benefit in his book. He turned to the youma. "New plan. On my signal, you get out of here and run in that direction. Keep going that way and don't deviate, or I won't be able to find you to and pick you up later. Do you understand? You can run, right?"

"Um. Run. That way. Sure thing." The creature pointed one triangular finger in the indicated direction, noting with relief that it wasn't taking her toward the sailor-suited menaces.

"Good. I'll leave the rest to you. Now go!" Zoisite said before disappearing in a swirl of flower petals, leaving his mentally challenged accomplice to fend for herself.

"Hey! Come back here!" Sailor Moon whined, panting as she looked at the back of the fleeing monster who had remembered that she could fly after being chased for several blocks, and was now taking a shortcut over a building.

"This isn't working! It's too fast!" Sailor Mars wheezed in the back of the formation. Since she had neither Sailor Jupiter's physique nor Sailor Moon's daily running training, which consisted of a mad dash to school, she was trailing a bit behind. "But the thing just made a mistake. While it's flying, I wont have to worry about accidentally hitting a bystander. Jupiter, give me a hand!"

"All right!" Following the red-skirted senshis lead, the brunette stopped and extended a lightning rod from her tiara. Both magical girls took aim and combined their powers, sending a swirling comet of fire interlaced with electricity after their foe, who obligingly kept moving in a straight line. The projectile struck true and exploded like a ground to air missile.

"Yes!" "We did it!" Moon took Jupiter by the hands and jumped up

and down cheerfully before a voice from near her feet interrupted.

"Look again!" Luna said, staring intently at the dissipating cloud of smoke. The youma, catapulted forward by the explosion, spun out of control and descended in a ballistic curve, leaving a spiralling trail of smoke behind.

"It can't survive that landing. Can it?" Jupiter asked, looking questioningly at Sailor Moon, who had much more experience in fighting youma than her.

Moon scratched her cheek in confusion. "Well, uh..."

"We have to go check and make sure!" Luna insisted, already sprinting ahead as fast as her little cat legs allowed. "At least it seems to have crashed in a small forest, well away from people!"

"This place is creepy," Sailor Jupiter said as the trio walked past the trees. The forest, little more than a private estate covered in pine trees, was so dark that the trio almost forgot that they were within a large city. The eerie grey fog that wafted between the sickly-looking plants turned each harmless bush into a menacing-looking silhouette.

"I wish Sailor Mercury was here,with us," Sailor Moon said wistfully, prompting Mars to look sad and nod. "She could have found the youma with her computer!"

"Don't worry, we *will* get her back somehow," Luna said from a tree branch above their heads. "There is a scorch mark in the clearing ahead. Sailor Mars, can you go check if there's any dark energy in it?"

"Okay." The long-haired girl stepped through the undergrowth and paused for a moment as she spotted the large mansion looming ahead, looking almost like a ruin with its faded colours and dark windows.

"Whoa. That looks like a haunted house at the amusement park," Jupiter said, stepping past Mars.

"G-g-ghosts?" Sailor Moon asked, her lower lip quivering as she peered into the twilight, already nervous from the surroundings.

"Don't be stupid! There are no ghosts here. Hey, isn't that..." she pointed at a red vehicle parked in the driveway in front of the imposing building.

"That's Nephrite's car!" Sailor Moon exclaimed.

The three girls exchanged looks, and without having to say a word, nodded at each other, jaws set in determination.

"Supreme Thunder!"

The entrance door to Nephrite's mansion exploded off of its hinges, bolts of lightning crackling around the smoking wood as it toppled into the dimly-lit hall room. The startled dark general reclining on a pale green stone throne within almost spilled red wine on his immaculate uniform and squinted at the doorway, from which daylight poured in. Three female, short-skirted silhouettes stood - no, posed - in the doorframe. A blonde with a blue skirt and long pigtails was in the centre, framed by one red and one green-skirted girl who presented themselves in profile, their backs facing the gesticulating blonde.

For a moment, Sailor Moon seemed at a loss for words, awed by the illusion of the night sky that hovered beneath the ceiling of the mansion's cathedral-like interior. Too soon for Nephrite's liking, she recovered and glared at him. "Nephrite! I won't forgive you for toying with the heart of innocent girls and for turning a cheerful estate into a spooky Dark Kingdom base! In the name of the Moon-"

"-and Mars -"

"- and Jupiter -"

"- we will punish you!" the trio finished together, uncrossing their arms and taking up battle stances as they entered the mansion and formed a half-circle around the long-haired dark general.

Nephrite let out an exasperated sigh. "Just what I needed. How did you even find this place? Oh, whatever. Fighting you isn't currently my job." The wavy-haired general's form became translucent as he faded away, leaving only his seat behind. Outside, a car door slammed shut, and its motor purred when the key turned in the ignition.

"He's running away again!" The three girls dashed for the mansion's door. Outside, Sailor moon steadied herself against the porch's railing, her pigtails whipping around as she searched for their quarry in the creepy surrounding woods. On the driveway to her left, Nephrite's red sport scar was moving. The dark general within raised his right hand from the steering wheel in a mocking wave.

Sailor Mars shouldered past Sailor Moon and put her index fingers together, leading her target. "Oh no, you don't! Fire Soul!"

Nephrite's eyes widened in alarm when the lighting within his car turned orange, becoming brighter by the second as a spiralling fireball approached the passenger seat's window. The motor howled and the wheels squealed as his foot slammed down hard on the gas pedal. Accelerating too quickly, the car jerked forward, leaving black tire marks on the ground. It made it almost to the safety of the trees before the fireball slammed into its back, rocking the chassis, instantly melting the wheels' rubber, and shoving it off the road. Out of control, the burning vehicle spun in a half-circle. The driver's door flew open and Nephrite jumped out, protecting his face with his arm as he rolled to a stop between the smouldering car and the team of senshi. Before he could get back to his feet, the flames reached the car's fuel tank, and a loud explosion shoved him into the dirt once more.

"Eeep." With closed eyes, Sailor Moon ducked and covered her head with both hands when the detonation assaulted her eardrums, pigtails fluttering nearly horizontally in the shockwave.

"Careful, Mars!" The tallest of the girls flattened herself against the wall, grabbed the red-skirted senshi by the shoulders and pulled her into safety too as sharp shards from the mansion's shattering windows started to rain down around them.

"Whoops." The raven-haired girl's eyes were wide, and she let out a nervous chuckle as she surveyed the results of her attack. "Well, at least I stopped him from getting away!"

Singed and with rips in his uniform, but no worse for wear, Nephrite got up and gaped at the bonfire consuming the creaking remains of his favourite mode of transportation. "You... you blew up my car!"

Sailor Mars gulped and took an unintentional step back when the dark general snarled and shot her a furious glare, eyes glowing with power. Backlit by the flaming wreckage, he rolled up his sleeves and advanced on the group of senshi, his long hair floating around him as if carried by undersea currents. "You brats are so going to get it now!"

Nero, the newly-ascended Keeper, froze as a faint roar echoed through his tunnels. The arachnid body he was possessing remained motionless as he listened, trying to make out the noise again over the distant clucking of the chickens in their pen and the regular thumping of his dungeon heart. His giant spiders didn't have the best sense of hearing, but he wouldn't let himself been caught in his real body while he was here on the Avatar islands. The very concept that some Keeper could throw spells at you in your own domain took some getting used to. As far as he knew, he was out of range of Mercury's dungeon hearts, but he was paranoid enough to not entrust his life to possibly faulty intelligence. Ah, but there was the noise again. He hadn't imagined it. The rock vibrated underneath the eight sensitive feet of his body. Quickly, the spider scuttled in the direction the roar had come from, following it deeper and deeper into the tunnels below. A decade-old layer of mold and dust covered the ground, undisturbed except for the footprints of the imp who had recently claimed these abandoned caverns. It took some time for Nero to locate the most likely point of origin of the sound in this forgotten maze, which happened to be a small chamber with a caved-in ceiling. The spider poked at the rubble. On closer inspection, this wasn't a chamber at all, but a shaft that led straight down, filled with debris and detritus.

The eight red pinpricks in the arachnid's face went dark, and the

wraith-like form of the former warlock emerged from its back, only to wrap around a rapidly-summoned imp. Nero would need hands for the next part of his investigation. While the confused spider skittered off into the torch-lit darkness, the Keeper lifted a crystal ball and concentrated. The swirling mist in the ball disappeared and went black, and the possessed creature saw only its own crimson-eyed face in the reflective glass. "Too dark. Bah." Well, this was a point where the crystal heart could come in handy. The former warlock concentrated, draining a single gold coin from his treasury as he gathered a minuscule amount of magical power and projected it at the location shown in the pitch-black orb. In the rectangular room connected to the bottom of the blocked shaft, the darkness parted before the conjured mote of light. The imp's lips parted into a small circle as it let out an appreciative "Ohhhhh!" before widening into an evil grin.

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Advisers Advise

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The red-hot heating coils winding around the eight gem furnaces radiated heat and light through the chamber, banishing the cold of the glacier. The ice walls seemed to sweat in the orange glare, and the constant drip of melt water provided the ambience of gentle rain falling in the chamber.

Ami, sitting on the elevated and roofed platform in the exact centre of the circle of furnaces, found the noise calming. With the current state of her finances, she felt that overseeing the sapphire fabrication process personally was the best way to ensure the maximum amount of gems could be produced in one production run. It was a small consolation that the other Keepers on the island were strapped for cash, too. Besides, it would be impolite to just let Jadeite's efforts to restore the factory to its former glory go to waste. With the dark general's glamour in place, the machinery looked good as new, and he had even managed to compensate for the new inclination of the iceberg. Ami glanced over to where the curly-haired blond was sitting at a desk of his own, showing no outward signs of the strain that maintaining the magic was putting on him. The grey-uniformed man was drawing up a new lesson plan for Ami, selecting spells and techniques from his repertoire that could be both useful for his employer and within her skill range. Ami didn't lick her lips, despite the sight tempting her to. Had she been asked, she wouldn't have been able to answer whether the dark general's profile or the prospect of learning more magic had triggered that urge. With flushing cheeks, she stared down on her keyboard again. She could afford the moment of distraction, since the readout on the Mercury computer's screen only occasionally required her to take action. Another benefit of Jadeite's glamour. Whenever it did, the levers on the eight separate control consoles moved, seemingly on their own. The next generation of furnaces would have a set of controls that could be linked up to a central panel, the blue-haired girl decided.

Perhaps I should downgrade to the older production process? she

thought, and called up the copies of the modern books she had scanned in with the help of her friends at home.The flame-fusion method of growing gems had been developed earlier than the method she was using right now, and it produced crystals with a high internal stress factor at an up to five times slower rate than the current process. The main drawback of that was that they had to be split to reduce the stress, and smaller gems were much less valuable than large ones. However, the required infrastructure was simpler and would not even require Ami's computer to supervise. She glanced down at her left wrist, where her scrying-detection armband remained inert. She would have to incorporate copy-protection measures, too. In any case, there were only two moving parts involved: the shaker-like container for the alumina powder, and the pedestal on which the sapphire formed from molten droplets of raw materials, and which needed to be retracted as the crystal grew. The simplest option would be a screw that turned at a constant rate, withdrawing the platform independently of the size of the created bauble. Ami touched a few keys, calling up a different window on the screen. On the other hand, if she could make the retraction rate of the platform dependent on the weight of the bauble, then she could ensure that the growing gemstone would remain at the optimal altitude for most of the process, with little external regulation required. Maybe a swimming platform with the right displacement would work? With growing excitement, she started coming up with designs. Now that her rats were gobbling up territory that wouldn't melt away when exposed to too much heat, she could build as many of these devices as it took to overcome the drawbacks of a slower growth rate and cheaper end product. The teenager smiled as she started solving equations pertaining to the density of the involved materials and the geometry of the required machinery. This was fun! She almost felt as if she was studying to keep up with her school work!

The footsteps of three approaching people echoed from the thin walkway bridging the channels conducting the melt water. Cathy, Jered, and Snyder approached, protected from the rain-like precipitation by an umbrella-like shield that the redhead was projecting. The violet screen wobbled with the impact of each droplet, calling into doubt how useful the acolyte's new trick would be in a real combat. Focused on her research, Ami almost missed

their approach. Upon noticing the three of them, her eyebrows rose. "Yes? Has something happened?"

"Not exactly," Cathy said, standing at the fore of the group, "but there's something we need to talk about. Snyder told us about your conversation with Marda." The tall woman put her arms akimbo. "We don't think you handled that situation well at all."

"You were too soft on her. Much too soft," Jered added. "We are going to see no end of discipline problems if that's how you handle insubordination."

"I have to agree," even Jadeite chimed in, not looking up from his writing. "It sets an unfortunate precedent, and makes you look weak in your minions' eyes."

"I needed to keep her from starting something we would all regret," Ami defended her course of action, sounding timid in the face of so much consolidated disapproval, and explained the logic behind her decisions. "If I had pressed her any harder, the volatile situation could have exploded into full-blown rebellion! We can't afford that at this point in time!"

"Oh, I'd say you have succeeded admirably, then!" Cathy said, and clapped her hands together, "she won't have to rebel if she can just walk all over you like that!"

"That's not fair, Cathy. I needed to stall for time," Ami answered. "I need the time to prepare. Now that I have a portal, I can hire more troops that are loyal to me, not Marda."

"Oh? How's that working out for you?" Cathy asked with professional interest.

"Um, I seem to attract mostly giant flies for now. They make a beeline to the larder as soon as they come in. I think the spider meat attracts them." Noting that everyone was staring at her as if she had just failed to answer a teacher's question properly in front of the class (not that she knew how that felt from personal experience), she quickly added "A few giant beetles also joined up!" She tugged at her hair in embarrassment as her advisers maintained the

uncomfortable silence, then hung her head. "All right, they may not be the most powerful creatures around, but nobody intelligent wants to come work on the Avatar Islands of their own free will yet. I'm sure I'll be able to find some use for them!"

"Yeah, when the goblins run out of food again," Jered muttered.

"In any case, the trolls shouldn't be a problem," Ami said with forced cheerfulness. "Now that they know that I don't hold their religion against them, they shouldn't be feeling threatened any more, so there's no reason to oppose me."

"That," Cathy drawled, "is a hopelessly optimistic point of view. First, you don't know if Marda shared that bit of information with them. In fact, I'd bet she didn't, since it sounds like exactly the kind of thing that would undermine her authority."

"Which means you should hold an audience with them as soon as possible," Jadeite interjected.

"Indeed. Second, they might not believe you and think that you are merely biding for time until you are ready," the blonde warrior continued.

"Snyder's presence should be able to convince them that I'm speaking the truth," Ami objected. "Besides, I'm happy to have some other non-evil beings working for me."

"Ah, yes. They are not exactly happy about worshipping the Light, I gather." Snyder pointed out. "Their conversion was a matter of pragmatism, rather than personal conviction or preference. What you actually have here is a group of trolls who resent having to adhere to a code of conduct that most surface dwellers would consider basic decency. They are acting out of fear of the consequences, not out of a genuine desire to be good."

"And that's enough for the Light gods to accept them?" Ami asked. It didn't sound like what devout worshippers should be like, in her opinion.

"Regardless of their reasons, they are not committing evil deeds.

Should they not reap the just rewards for their restraint?" Snyder answered.

"Theological issues aside, just because they are *good*," Jered's fingers formed quotation marks in the air as he said the last word, "doesn't mean that they will have a problem rising up against you. You are a Keeper, in case you have forgotten."

"Well, yes," Ami conceded. "I was thinking about ways to gain their loyalty and support. For example, if I make their lives here more comfortable, they'll want them to stay that way. If they considered my dungeon home, they would be much less inclined to do anything that would get them kicked out."

"You want to get them hooked on luxury just so you can take it away when it pleases you?" Jered said with a grin. "That's remarkably sneaky."

"It does sound a little twisted if you put it that way," Ami said, an amused smile playing around her lips.

"It's going to be expensive," the wavy-haired man added, closing his eyes as he calculated in his head. "Just slapping the minions around would cost a lot less, but your plan could work with the greedier ones." The green-shirted man winked as he put an arm around Cathy. "I suggest you start with our rooms!"

The scar-faced blonde was not smiling, and shook her head. "It's not going to be that easy. Most of the Underworld creatures have quite the temper, and many of them aren't smart enough to think about the long term when there's a lower-hanging fruit dangling in front of their nose. The only way to keep them in line is to absolutely terrify them, because obeying the strongest is just what they are used to. You threaten their privileges? Well, then you had better be willing to enforce that, because otherwise they'll just defend them by force."

Ami's face fell as the blonde spoke. An almost missed signal from her computer prompted her to adjust the settings on one of the furnaces, and she telekinetically pulled the lever hard enough to make it clang against the control panel in her haste.

Cathy used the young Keeper's distraction to keep talking. "Also, think about what you are going to need to keep your minions happy. Nice accommodations and good food are one thing, but they'll also want entertainment and distractions. Music, booze, drugs, gambling, fights, and... well, other things. You can probably see where I'm going with this," the tall woman said, her cheeks taking on a rosy colour.

Ami nodded quickly to stave off a more detailed explanation, blushing. She was, after all, smart enough to finish that sentence in her head.

"Anyway, most of this is just avoiding the main issue. You have to punish transgressions harshly, no matter your personal preferences."

"There just has to be a better way," the teenager sighed. "I don't want to be feared!" She had few enough friends as it was.

"If your minions do not fear you, then you are responsible for any innocent deaths they cause while defying your orders," Jadeite stated matter-of-factly, since Cathy was almost voicing his own opinion on the matter. Pampering youma in order to keep them under control? Ridiculous. He knew the gentle girl well enough by now to know what kind of argument would make an impression.

As expected, Ami flinched as if she had been slapped, and paled. For some reason, the dark general felt like an utter bastard as he noted some liquid glitter in the corners of her red-glowing eyes. "That- but- Darn it!" she voiced her frustration. Her fingers clenched tightly into fists as she closed her eyes and hung her head. She wanted to protest, she really did, but no brilliant counter-argument came to mind. She couldn't in good conscience pretend that herunderlings would not do something like that. They *were* evil, even if they had little opportunity to express this within her dungeon. Given the opportunity, they wouldn't think twice about hurting innocents.

"Ah, well, do not take it too hard," Snyder tried to comfort the sad-looking girl. "The creatures already consider you terrifying by default, since you are a Dungeon Keeper. All you have to do is

reinforce that image. Crack down on minor defiance harshly enough that nobody will want to find out what you do to those who have truly incurred your wrath. That way, you can avoid having to do something truly distasteful to punish major infractions."

"Do you really think so?" Ami looked up at the acolyte with sudden hope, even though her body language remained glum.

"Yeah, and it's not as if you'd be arbitrarily meting out punishment," Cathy agreed, trying to cheer the blue-haired girl up. "Knowing you, if someone is punished, they did something to deserve it."

"Yep. Besides, you don't have to do it yourself," Jered added. "You could hire some dark mistresses. They are experts in the area of inflicting-"

"No!" Ami almost shouted as she rose from her chair, her eyes blazing red. "If I have to employ someone whose job it is to torture," she grimaced and swallowed, unsettled by the notion, "which I am not saying that I am going to, then it will not be someone who *enjoys* it!"

"F-fine," The wavy haired man said, backing down as those lamp-like crimson eyes narrowed at him. "Probably better that way, really." He gulped. "You can be quite good at this 'being scary' thing if you want to, you know."

"Right. Moving on. I take it you don't completely disagree with our points at least?" Cathy asked, drawing Ami's attention away from the weasel-featured man. Reluctantly, the teenager nodded, grimacing as if she had just swallowed something bitter. "All right. So you need to do something about Marda."

Ami shook her head. "I don't want to appear fickle, and my reasons for letting her off easy have not changed yet."

"Well, then you should see about getting more recruits. You have some currently unemployed prisoners in your cell block, and the continent is full of vampires," Cathy suggested.

"Hire the vampires you mean?" Ami scratched her head. On one

hand, the monsters were undead bloodsuckers. On the other, she didn't have any problems with undead *as such*, once she got past the creepiness factor. What she had problems with were the reanimated victims' indefinitely prolonged suffering in the case of skeletons and ghosts, and with killing people to create these monsters in the first place. The vampires, however, didn't seem to be in a state of constant torment, and they were already around. They also knew the lay of the land, and she was awfully curious about how exactly Zarekos had managed to recover from his banishment so quickly. *They'll just have to subsist on blood sucked from fresh imp corpses,* she pondered as she considered the problem of care and feeding. "I suppose if I could bear having the Reaper around, vampires aren't so bad..."

"Good! Then let's go see what we can do with our prisoners once you are done here."

Ami's knowledge of methods to inflict pain and suffering as a punishment was woefully inadequate, and she would have to study up on them, she realised, letting her shoulders droop. For the first time in her short life, she was confronted with a research topic she couldn't enjoy at all. *Still, there's no avoiding it.* The blue-haired girl didn't think she had it in her to ever order someone tortured. Threaten with it, perhaps, but even that required her to know what she was talking about if she wanted to be taken seriously. She dearly hoped that the worst she would ever be forced to use was something humiliating and uncomfortable, like the pillory, for example. Nothing that could cause lasting harm. Unfortunately, the existence of healing magic extended that area to truly stomach-turning dimensions. Feeling queasy and repressing the urge to hide in a corner and curl up in a ball, she increased her pace toward the occupied cells, hoping to get away from her advisers' discussion about what would be fitting entry-level disciplinary measures, and the disturbing technicalities thereof.

"...flogging is used even in some surface armies," Cathy's energetic voice sounded behind her. The tall blonde was gesticulating with her hands, apparently trying to convince her boyfriend of something.

"No. Have you seen how thick those skins are? There would need to be barbs, at the very least!" Jered said, doubting the effectiveness of her proposed strategy.

"What about keelhauling? This is a ship, technically."

"No! Give it a rest you two, *please*. That's nothing like what I had in mind!" Ami snapped, unable to tune out their conversation any longer. The entire exasperating problem was weighing on her mind like a millstone, and each further suggestion felt as if it was eating away at her heart.

A goblin approached from a corner. Seeing the Keeper in the prison area, followed by her two chief underlings who were discussing torture methods, he jumped to the obvious but wrong conclusion. Rubbing his hands excitedly in anticipation of the expected entertainment, he asked "I can help, yes? I saw nice set of pliers and hot coal in workshop. Should I get?"

The green-skinned creature froze like a rabbit in a basilisk's stare as eyes like brightly burning coals focused on him. The crimson orbs glowed so intensely that the surrounding face framed by blue bangs appeared bathed in shadows. The goblin did not miss the subtle signs that the stressed Keeper was displeased with his suggestion - such as the deeply-furrowed brows and the angrily twitching fingers - and his ears drooped. "Eeep! Ganok be going now!" As he darted away, he was very glad that he wasn't one of the prisoners that the group was heading towards.

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A Fitting Punishment

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At Ami's approach, the seven prisoners within separate cells turned their heads to look at her, some with interest, some with terror. The latter emotion was most evident on the faces of the long-eared dark elves, who had no doubt caught parts of Cathy's and Jered's conversation. Since their skin was naturally as white as the arches of ice that formed the ceiling, it was impossible for her to tell whether or not they had paled at her approach. In contrast, the two lobster-red bile demons barely looked up, even when her small form obscured a torch on the wall and cast a long, flickering shadow over them. Both of the near-spherical lumps of fat and muscle were huddling in the far corners of their respective cells, careful not to sit in one of the drying puddles of soapy bathwater left over from their involuntary cleaning. Only one of the two met Ami's crimson eyes, and the wobbly demon let out a startled snort as she straightened so quickly that ripples wobbled over the ocean of fat girding her non-existent waist. Ami heard Jered let out a gasp of pain as his girlfriend tagged him in the side with a well-aimed elbow jab. He must have been leering at the dark elf females, who were wearing the same sort of uniform as the bile demons. It consisted of belt-like bands of black leather that covered the essentials and not much more, criss-crossing asymmetrically along the torso and legs. If the Keeper had ordered the plump bile demons to get into that outfit for any other reason than to evoke revulsion and nausea in his enemies, the blue-haired girl certainly did not want to know. Suppressing a shudder, she averted her gaze and inspected the more attractive dark elves instead. Clinging to their lithe forms, the outfit looked so daring and provocative that Ami could feel her cheeks heat up at the mere thought of wearing something like that in public. *But Jadeite certainly* would *notice me if...* Ami stamped down hard on that treacherous train of thought before it could fully form, her ears burning. To make matters worse, one of the dark elves had misinterpreted her prolonged inspection and was stretching herself in a way that highlighted her figure, arching her back as her tongue wetted her lips. Jered let out a whistle, which abruptly ended with

another hiss of pain.

"Stop that," Ami demanded, mortified and exasperated at the same time. At least she didn't hide her face in her hands. That would have given the wrong impression.

The hairless elf gulped and stood straight, wondering why everything she did just served to annoy Mercury more. Eline's heart raced in her chest as those crimson eyes scowled at her. Did the Keeper remember her laughing at the mishaps with the tentacle monster? No, there was no recognition in her eyes. "O-of course."

"Now," Ami said, sweeping her gaze over the waiting prisoners."As those of you who were conscious at the time may know, I have already defeated your employer." Some of the elves nodded, but two of them looked startled, Eline among them. "Who was it, anyway?"

"We were working for Keeper Morrigan," the elf in the cell to the right answered eagerly, attempting to be useful.

"Morrigan." Ami repeated, but the name did not ring any bells. In any case, she would leave it to Cathy and Jered to question the captives more in-depth later and get all the details. "What you probably don't know is that I destroyed Zarekos first."

The wide-eyed chorus of disbelieving gasps was quite satisfying. "That's- we never had a chance, did we?" one of the prisoners whispered, sounding sullen.

"That makes you the remaining loose end." Now, Ami had the prisoners' complete and undivided attention. They almost didn't dare to breathe for fear of missing her next words. All of them broke into cold sweat as they imagined their possible fates.. In the case of the bile demons, the liquid exuded from their pores was a sickly yellow colour and smelled of sulphur. Ami hated seeing the fear in the prisoners' eyes, brought out by the knowledge that she could have them killed or tortured at a whim. She abruptly decided that maintaining her evil image was not worth making them suffer like that for no reason, and deviated from her intended script. Instead of going into a long spiel intended to make them fear for their lives

(more), she simply asked "Do any of you have any useful skills?"

The prisoners were quick to grasp at the proffered lifeline, and erupted into a cacophony of loud shouts. "I'm an elite markswoman!" "Me too!" "Stealth and-" "Infiltr-" "Poisons!" "Seduction!" "Thrown daggers and accuracy spells!" "I can put a bolt into someone's eyes at seventy cubits!"

Ami held up her hand with her palm facing outward in a defensive gesture, causing them to quiet down. "I am willing to hire you, on one condition." She looked at the bile demons in particular. "You have to wash and remain clean. Can you agree to that?"

The red demons looked at her in horror, and she could have sworn their horizontal horns had sagged upon hearing her condition. Neither of the two made a sound.

"No. Of course you can't." Ami inclined her head and shook it, and the two bloated demons disappeared with a slight popping noise. The air quality in the narrow hall improved dramatically the moment they were gone.

The bravest of the dark elf women raised a shaking hand. "Er, w-what did you do to them?"

"I got rid of them," the teenager replied in an impassive tone of voice, trying to pretend being the kind of person that they would not want to disobey. It was fairly hard to project an unfeeling mask, if she was honest with herself. A large part of her only wanted to provide them with some blankets, since their skin was starting to look blue from the cold. She obviously hadn't killed the bile demons either, only tossed them into the portal and given them a hard shove to help them through. If her prospective employees opted to misunderstand her, so be it.

"The rest of you are hired," Ami continued before they could change their minds. She handed each of the women a coin in a symbolic gesture, which forged their link with the dungeon heart, severing the tattered one that had bound them to Morrigan. "Cathy and Jered here will get you settled in. You will obey them as you would obey me. For your own safety, don't enter any corridors that are marked

with a band of black and red chequerboard tiles along the walls. The traps within are indiscriminate." All the cell doors swung open at once, creaking as they did. Ami pointed at her advisers. "Now go and tell them everything you know about Keeper Morrigan," the blue-haired girl ordered before disappearing in a swirl of flashing blue.

It was payday, which was an opportunity to hold court. Ami's throne room was packed with the various creatures that dwelt in her dungeon, who chatted with each other to pass the time until the Keeper showed up. The different species stuck together in small groups that intermingled with the others only at the edges, and the team of five dark elves drew almost as much attention as the heaps of glittering gold arranged around the throne. The new arrivals had secured one of the tablets with Underworld snacks for themselves and stood segregated from the other minions, almost as if there was an invisible barrier between them. They returned any suspicious stares with glares of their own, but most of the time, they were just gaping at the sights. Especially the scythe-wielding goblins walking through the room with a proud gait were cause for some raised eyebrows. Four of the pointy-eared women had already taken the opportunity to slip into more concealing linen shirts and trousers, but a fifth was still wearing her revealing black garb. As a result, she was suffering less from the isolation that came from being the newbies, and more from the clumsy attempts of the usually aloof warlocks who tried to hit on her. Just as she was considering pulling her dagger and stabbing one of the more persistent old lechers in the kidneys, a bright blue flash from the throne drew everyone's attention. The conversations died down as Keeper Mercury appeared on her throne, clad in her black and golden ensemble, and took a seat in between the two braziers that rested on slender pedestals to both sides of her. She had arranged these lights in such a way that they illuminated the assembled masses while keeping herself veiled in shadows. A cheap trick to add an air of mystery to herself, but then, subtlety was not what her audience expected from a Keeper.

Ami's large eyes were two glowing red coals in her dark silhouette

as she addressed her employees. "Hello everyone. I am very satisfied with your work for me so far, and thus, I am not going to torment you with a long and dry speech." Her attempt at levity drew a few cautious chuckles, but not many. The combination of the words 'torment' and 'you' had a chilling effect on most creatures when uttered by a Keeper. "When your name is read from the list, come to the front to receive your pay." She waved her hand, and a big-headed goblin holding a huge scroll hurried out of the crowd. He could read, and therefore, Ami had named him a herald for this kind of gatherings. Since the job came with a fancy red coat and a floppy hat, he was the envy of his peers. He took a deep breath, greedily sucking air into his tiny chest, and shouted the first name on the list. The named warlock stepped forward, bowed to Mercury, and approached the table in front of the stairs leading up to her throne. Jered, seated at this improvised desk, consulted his ledger and started counting coins into the dark wizard's hands.

Jadeite floated in the relative darkness just underneath the high ceiling of the wall, watching the routine procession of creatures walking up to the throne, receiving their pay from the shrinking heaps of gold, and returning to their places. He found the proceeding exceedingly boring, but then, he was used to pointless ceremonies from Queen Beryl's court. He almost hoped that Mercury's little surprise would backfire. In that case, he would have some excitement to look forward to.

Ami tensed when the last of the goblins turned his back to her and disappeared back into the masses, happily swinging his bulging leather purse. With no more intelligent denizens of her dungeon to pay, it was time for the second part of this gathering. She just hoped that this plan to ensure obedience and discipline wouldn't blow up in her face. Jadeite and Jered thought that it would work, but she felt less confident about predicting how Marda would react. The teenager sat up straighter to make herself appear bigger.

"Everyone," she said and waited for the chatter to die down. "I have an announcement to make!" The room was quiet now, all faces turned toward her and away from the snacks. "Now that all of you have gold in your pockets, you must be painfully aware that this

dungeon lacks opportunities to actually spend it. Since we currently have access to a portal, I have decided to authorise visits to the Underworld. However-" Ami had to raise the voice to make herself heard over the sudden cheering, "we are still at war, and therefore, only five of you may go at the same time. Commander Cathy has prepared a list where you can apply for shore leave, so to speak. It will work on a first come, first served bases." She saw several creatures inch toward the exit immediately, but none of them dared disrespect her by dashing toward that list just yet. The next part would be the critical one. "Make sure that everything is in order before you leave. We wouldn't want any unauthorised escapades, would we?" Ami's gaze focused on a chainmail-clad figure in a sea of smaller, green-skinned humanoids. "Isn't that right, Marda?"

The female troll's head jerked up sharply, and her eyes met Mercury. The broad-nosed creature's brows furrowed, but not before Ami saw surprise flicker across Marda's features. The other dungeon denizens edged away from the singled-out female, who suddenly found herself in a spacious circle. In a show of solidarity, her warriors closed in, filling up the space around her. "Naturally," Marda answered after a moment, voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Oh, don't worry, I'm not going to put a stop to that. In fact, since you seem to like charging into unknown territory full of hungry vampires, ghosts, and other hazards so much that you went out to smite my enemies without consulting me first, I task you with doing so again," Ami said with false sweetness.

"Your kindness truly knows no limits," Marda drawled, drawing surprised gasps at her impudence from the onlookers. They were amazed to find that Mercury let her continue without some kind of retribution "Do you have a specific target in mind?"

"Use your own judgement," Ami said, "I'll tell you when to come back."

"Very well. I shall select my finest warriors and-"

"Oh, you don't get any help," Ami interrupted with the same fake friendliness as before. "Off you go!"

As the troll disappeared into thin air, the blue-haired girl watched the faces of her employees very carefully, judging their reactions. Most seemed stunned at this course of events, but not for long. The smarter ones nodded to themselves as the world made sense again. *They* certainly wouldn't want to be sent out into a barren wasteland full of ravenous undead alone. Calling the punishment something else just added insult to injury. Most of Ami's attention was focused on Marda's loyal warriors though. While they did not look happy, they also seemed less upset than they should. In fact, the blue-haired Keeper could make out a few contemptuous smirks with her Keeper sight that would have been concealed if she had only used her eyes. They clearly believed that she was underestimating their leader, or at least unaware that she could call up independent reinforcements from their island stronghold. Ami let out a relieved breath. If they thought that Marda had pulled the wool over her eyes, then they wouldn't rise up against her. Just as planned. The ruse wouldn't annoy or even inconvenience Marda much, but to the others, it would look as if she had just been sent on a suicide mission without a moment to prepare. Ami checked on the troll woman whom she had deposited at the very edge of her territory. She found it necessary to correct her assessment, at least about causing annoyance to the troll.

Water and fire were warring in the sky where Ami's thunderclouds encroached on the fiery cloud banks that circled over the Avatar Islands. Above her new territory, the black storm front wedged its way into the red-coloured clouds like an expanding scorch mark on a paper map. The border of her territory literally smouldered where the storm ripped deep gashes into the local cloud cover, exposing the burning gases raging within. Deep below that inferno, the torrential rainfalls had turned the ground into a syrupy, disgusting mess of soaked ash and mud. Marda's metal boots sank up to the ankles into the slimy muck with each step, while the gusts of wind were only too happy to fling the clingy dirt into her face. Caked all over with the grey and black grime, the troll resembled a moving statue. Marda demonstrated once more that she could sense when Ami was watching, and raised her right in a rude gesture, dramatically backlit by a brilliant bolt of lightning. She kind of ruined the effect though when she aborted the pose to cover her ears when deafening thunder followed the flash almost instantly.

Back in the throne room, the crowd was silent as it waited for the Keeper's next action. Ami folded her hands and looked at the warlocks. "Given your current preoccupation with the war effort, you can delay your weekly reports on your research progress until next week. Does anyone want to bring up some other issue?" She let her gaze wander over the rows of mismatched faces, but nobody stepped forward. "Good. Dismissed."

Ami waited one more minute after the underlings had filed out of the room before she allowed her rigid posture to relax. Her lips curved upward, turning her serious expression into a relieved smile. "That went better than expected," she declared, prompting Jered to look up from his ledger, and Jadeite to drift down from his observation spot up in the air.

"Well done," the curly-haired blond praised her efforts. "To be honest, I was a bit worried about your performance after seeing the way you handled hiring those dark elves. You didn't even make them beg for the privilege of working for you. However, you acted this out well. The giggling after you sent Marda away was a particularly nice touch."

"G-giggling? I didn't giggle. Did I?" Ami looked into the round, and Jered nodded slowly in confirmation. "Oh" Ami hid her mouth behind her hands. "I didn't realise. I think all the stress must be catching up with me."

"Don't worry about it. I think it scared the troops more than anything you could have said," Jadeite tried to comfort her.

Ami winced. "I see. At least I didn't have to hurt anyone." She was silent for a while. "Well, I suppose I should stop moping about how I don't really want to be feared, and put more effort into taking over the rest of this continent."

"That's the spirit," Jered agreed. "I think the warlocks are done with the sample scryings in the pattern you ordered, and..."

Last edited: Sep 16, 2016

Interrupted Plotting

Originally on 2010-09-03T22:17:00

In the quiet command centre, Ami leaned over the stone table littered with various maps of the Avatar Islands. From time to time, her fingers danced over the Mercury computer that rested on the left corner of the polished plate, and enter some piece of data that had caught her attention. Occasionally, the handful of warlocks on active duty in the room craned their necks to throw curious glances at the wondrous device she was using. Paper rustled as she quickly flipped through a few of the note-covered sheets before she looked up in confusion. "Jered, have you seen the observation sheets with the scrying results from twelve and fourteen hours ago?"

The wavy-haired man standing to her right ducked and grabbed a few sheets that had slid off the table. "These?"

"Yes, that's them, thank you." Ami's index finger briefly traced some of the red dots jotted down near a half-moon shaped bay, and diligently fed the information into her program. On the wall at the far end of the room, the enlarged projection of the palmtop's display changed to reflect her updates.

"Got it," Cathy commented from behind Ami. The blonde was sitting on the armrest of the command chair, which provided her with a good, elevated vantage point. "Can you play back the changes in sequence again, please?"

Ami touched a few buttons, and three splotches of colour expanded on the grey-scale map like spilled paint. On the north-western coast, thin tendrils grew fast from the aquamarine blot denoting her own territory. They represented the narrow, straight 'highways' of land that she had her rats claim in order to cover as much distance as possible. She would backfill the rest later. For the moment, she wanted a fast transport network. Near the centre of the map, about ninety kilometres south of the ruined former seat of the Avatar, Skybird Trill, a near circular red spot expanded its blurry edges in a

spiral pattern.

Cathy pointed at that mark. "All right. From the invariant rate at which that claim grows, I conclude that the number of imps is remaining constant. That would indicate that it belongs to one of the vampires who grabbed a heart for themselves."

"A brilliant deduction, Commander," Jadeite sneered, "as if the various ghosts and skeletons weren't a dead giveaway."

"That pun was awful," Cathy commented cheerfully. "Whoever it is should be working under the same limitation as Zarekos. I think that the guy to the south is going to be more of a problem." She extended her index finger, pointing at the expanse of green at the south-western coast, geographically much closer to the dungeon's position. "Not only is he using a similar expansion strategy to our own, he's doing it underground, *and* the rate is increasing. Whoever it is has gold."

"Hmm." Ami felt a shiver of apprehension when she looked at the point of origin of that sprawling green mess. She knew it well. It was where Zarekos had crushed her first invasion and destroyed her dungeon heart. She and her power had been banished from the land henceforth, and should she get too close to it, the realm of the dark gods would swallow her as it had done before. Ami trembled. She had no desire to encounter Azzathra again. Which meant that any troops she employed there would be on their own, with neither Keeper transport nor support magic to assist them. What a headache. The only glimmer of hope in this disastrous situation was that the enemy dungeon heart had to be the one she had extensively studied to develop her own, for what this was worth. "We'll have to contain that one somehow. A direct assault is currently out of the question."

"Can we increase our own claiming speed for that purpose?" Jered asked, drawing several lines on the map that intersected the estimated future enemy expansion.

"Not without getting more rats," Ami informed him. "In fact, we will probably slow down, since the feral ghosts won't leave them alone."

"I'll see what I can do about organising better escorts for them," Cathy offered, "Do you think the Keeper to the south is that other Azzathra-worshipper that the elves talked-"

Blackness enveloped the room for an instant, as if the lights had suffered from fluctuations in the power supply. A deformed, black-cloaked body hit the table with a loud thump, prompting Ami to jump away with a startled shriek. The blue-haired girl blinked rapidly as she recognised the creature writhing sluggishly among the scattering papers. "Umbra?" On the other side of the table, Jered slid an unused dagger back into his bandoleer as he realised that they were not under attack.

"Ow! Ow! Dammit! Argh!" the youma groaned, and Ami's eyes went wide when she realised what looked so off about her spy. Her entire left arm was missing, including a part of the shoulder. Green blood seeped through the fingers pressed against the open wound and spilled onto the maps.

"SNYDER!" Ami was at the injured youma's side in an instant, hands growing green with necromantic magic as she focused on stemming the flow of blood.

The redhead appeared in the room, looking confused. "Yes, what-oh!"

"This isn't working at all," Ami shouted in a near panic when her necromancy failed to affect the injury at all. Motes of magic coalesced into a roll of white bandages as she prepared to apply a more mundane solution. "Jadeite, is this normal for youma? Snyder, see what you can do!"

Snyder gently but firmly shoved her aside so he could get a better look at the injury. He grimaced almost the moment he caught sight of the rent flesh. "That is a cursed wound. It cannot be healed through normal means."

"How do we fix it?" Ami asked as she pried away Umbra's fingers so she could dress the large and lethal-looking injury.

"YARGH! Watch it, humans, that hurts!" Umbra's reflexive swipe

might have been dangerous if it had not come in slow motion. Neither Ami nor Snyder had to even hurry to pull their hands out of the path of the clawed fingers.

"Normally, I would recommend blessings and attaching prayer strips to the stump to draw the black magic out. Given the demonic nature of the patient, I suspect that such a treatment would cause more harm than good," the acolyte replied to the teenager's question. "She also seems to be under a second curse, which slows her down. If it also affects her blood flow, she might very well have died already without it."

Ami put her hands to her mouth in fright, and immediately regretted doing so when she felt the wetness of youma blood still clinging to her digits. Hearing footsteps approach from behind, she turned her head. Jadeite was approaching with purposeful steps. "Jadeite! Can you help her? Um. What are you planning to do with that sword?" She eyed the sharp weapon that the dark general had produced out of nowhere with wary caution. Putting Umbra out of her misery was *not* a solution she was willing to apply, or even contemplate.

"I am going to slice the cursed part off," Jadeite explained. "Hold her down so she doesn't move and stand ready to close the wound."

"Wait, wait, WHAT?" Umbra screeched, redoubling her thrashing, which looked more like a gentle undulation at the speed she was going. Her emerald eyes darted around in their sockets like those of a frightened animal.

"We really should apply anaesthesia first," Ami said as she grabbed the curly-haired man's sword arm with both hands and held it down.

"Yes! Yes, you should!" the injured youma agreed, sounding fainter by the minute.

"Do you know any that work on youma?" Jadeite asked and stared into Ami's eyes.

The teenager had to look away and shake her head after realising that no, in this situation a life drain would be an incredibly bad idea. If it even worked on youma at all. "Snyder?"

"Ah, well, I suppose the general's suggestion could work, if his proposed cure doesn't kill her first," the acolyte murmured. "Unfortunately, my training did not include any spells appropriate for this particular situation."

Jadeite shrugged Ami's grip off and positioned himself next to the cringing youma. "There you have it. Make sure she doesn't move, and get ready to heal her!" He proceeded to raise the blade, which gleamed bluish in the light of the corrupted lamps on the ceiling.

Wincing internally, Ami reached out with her Keeper power, pressing Umbra onto the blood-slick surface of the table hard enough that she could barely shiver, let alone move. Jadeite wasted no time, and the weapon flashed downwards. A meaty thud followed, accompanied with a hoarse scream from the youma. Ami felt hot green blood splash her. She shuddered and suppressed the urge to vomit, or to waste time with brushing the warm liquid off. It would turn into dust soon enough, just like that slice of flesh and bone covered with green-stained bandages just did. She hoped. She put her horror at the procedure out of her mind by laying her hands on the fresh wound and concentrating on weaving the flesh together. To her relief, the necromancy took hold this time, and soon, she had to concentrate too much on sewing muscles together, mending blood vessels, and smoothing sharp-edged bones to think about how grossed-out she felt. "All done." Ami wiped the sweat from her forehead with her sleeve when the last of the wound had disappeared beneath fresh scar tissue and looked at her handiwork. Umbra's left arm, shoulder, and part of the collarbone was just gone, leaving her shape hideously asymmetric. A human would have been dead from the damage alone, but the youma was still alive and grinding her teeth together, sucking in air through her nostrils as she fought to resist the pain. "I- I am very sorry that you got injured like that in my service," the blue-haired girl said, hanging her head and wringing her hands as she searched for words of comfort that wouldn't sound trite.

"Don't be. She's a youma," Jadeite said harshly, stepping to Ami's side. She looked up at him questioningly. "She will fully recover from anything that doesn't outright kill her, eventually."

"Oh." Ami's mouth went round in astonishment, before turning into a

faint little smile. Since Umbra wasn't maimed for life, the teenager allowed herself to enjoy the fact that she had actually saved a patient. Doing some good for a change felt great! Of course, it helped that the grime from the 'operation' was cleaning itself up by disintegrating into silvery dust.

"Thank you so much for your concern," Umbra gasped in pain and exhaustion as she frowned at Jadeite.

"Lip so soon after almost dying?" The dark general took a step forward, glaring darkly at the crippled creature. Ami reached around him and put a hand on his shoulder to hold him back and stop him from pressuring the weakened patient too much.

"I'm in - wheeze - too much - cough - pain to care right now!"

"Jadeite, is there anything we can do to speed up her recovery?" Ami's hand remained on the man's shoulder. Maybe she should remove it? Nah, he did not seem to mind.

The dark general scratched his head. "I'm not a healer. You probably just need to feed her a lot so her body has what it needs to regenerate."

"Feed? You mean with life energy? I have never seen Mareki or Tiger touch any normal food." Ami said, intrigued about learning something new, but also worried about the possible dietary requirements.

Jadeite chuckled. "Life energy? If that was the case, they would all have long since starved in the Dark Kingdom." He let out another amused chuckle. "Youma don't have to eat, though many enjoy it. They subsist on the ambient magic in the Dark Kingdom, most of which is radiated by our Great Ruler. Those youma who do have a preference for eating normally usually find a package of more concentrated energies in the form of the local fauna and flora and glamour it into a meal."

Ami digested this new information as she watched Umbra, whose chest was rising and lowering rapidly. "So if I give her normal food, it won't help her much, but if I copied the meal with magic and gave

her *that*, it would strengthen her?"

The curly-haired blond nodded. "You have the gist of it. I think you also provide them with a huge snack whenever you possess them, but I'd advise against that in this case. The shape-changing side effects could re-open the wound. Besides, being in that body right now sounds like a poor idea." He smirked when Umbra scowled at him and let out a pained hiss. It stopped abruptly when Ami conjured a piece of fish and stuffed it in her mouth.

"Is that better?" the teenage Keeper asked as she watched the youma struggle to chew and swallow the food. "Actually, you have given me a great idea!" Ami let go of Jadeite and skipped over to her computer, where she called up her research file and typed a quick note. Cathy, who was positioned just right to catch a glimpse on the screen past the enthusiastic girl's back, could read a single sentence fragment. Her eyebrows rose up to her hairline at the words. *Conjured alcohol - no long term side effects?*

"What I'm most interested in is what happened to you, Umbra," Jered said, approaching the improvised operation table. "Where and how did you get hurt?"

Ami closed her computer and listened in. With all the excitement, she had almost forgotten to consider that question. She had the sudden, dreadful premonition that this was Marda's fault somehow.

By now, the youma had forced the lump of food down her throat and stopped twitching so much. "Was spying on that southern Keeper. Some of the deeper tunnels. Tried- tried lifting some gold from his treasury. Something jumped me from behind." She wheezed in pain some more. "Heard a whistle and dodged, but not fast enough..."

"Something snuck up on *you*?" Jadeite asked in disbelief.

"Yeah, rub it in," Umbra replied, visibly angry at herself.

"Is there anything else you need?" Ami asked the youma lying on top of the ruined maps. "If not, I'll send you somewhere more comfortable. The slowing curse should fall apart on its own soon enough."

"That would be nice, my Lady," Umbra replied and found herself whisked away into a soft bed from one moment to the other. On the drawer to her right, more of the pieces of fish waited for her on a plate.

Back in the command centre, Ami turned to the warlocks, who had been silently watching all the time, but made no move to interfere. "You saw what happened," Ami addressed them, "I want a thorough survey of that dungeon's lower levels. See if you can find any creatures that could be responsible for this."

"Yes, Keeper!" the purple-robed magicians confirmed and hurried to their seats. The window-like scrying devices set in the wall in front of them lit up. As the chanting of the warlocks increased, they changed their appearance from empty aquariums into true windows that showed foggy vistas of distant tunnels.

"Check on the accommodations and training areas you mapped during the earlier surveys, then start your search at the bottom," Ami advised. "Let's see if whoever is running that place has managed to attract something other than skeletons and ghosts by now."

"I got something," one of the magicians called, stroking his beard.

Ami hurried over, followed by the others. "That quickly?"

"I just followed the trail of blood," the gangly wizard answered, gesturing at the screen with a gnarled hand. He soon felt crowded when everyone leaned in around him to get a better view of the cavernous hall he had found.

"Charming," Cathy said, resorting to sarcasm to cope with the charnel house she saw. Dead, dismembered spiders were everywhere. They hung from the ceiling like macabre garlands. They stuck to the walls, impaled on meat hooks. Piles of them covered the floor, leaving only a thin, bloody path that led to the centre of the room. Perhaps more disturbing was the painstaking care that had been taken to organise this mess. The corpses were sorted by size and colour, arranged so that they would form a framework that drew the eye to the centrepiece of this hall of horrors: a throne constructed from the gleaming shells of the spiders. Their chitin had

been cut into fine bands, polished, and assembled like a demented jigsaw puzzle to form a high-backed chair with massive armrests. It was occupied.

"At least you are not the only one who has problems with difficult minions," Jered said, trying to find some aspect that made the sights less disturbing.

"A reaper?" Ami asked, blinking several times before narrowing her eyes at the image. "That is a reaper, right?" She did not sound entirely sure of her assessment. The red creature reclining on its throne was wearing the right outfit and had long, straight horns all right, but it was not even half as broad in the shoulders as her former Reaper. He had been a bundle of bulging muscles, nearly as wide as he was tall. This thing was lean and sinewy. It was like the difference between a body builder and a sprinter, only much more exaggerated. For a moment, Ami considered that she might be looking at a female of the species. The bare chest, covered only by a chain that held together the metal pauldrons on the monster's shoulders, was flat and disproved that theory quickly. Unless even the females of that kind of demon did not develop breasts, Ami amended in her mind. In which case the only certain way to tell would be checking underneath the hoofed beast's loincloth, which she had no intention of doing.

"It's all teeth," Cathy pointed out. She came very close to the truth. Most of the monster's face was taken up by a perpetual, frozen grin that bared fangs that were as long as the entire rest of the skull. The eyes above the impressive maw did not glow yellow. Instead, two featureless white eyes like bleached bones stared into the darkness, lacking pupils and iris completely. Two slits instead of a nose wiped all remaining traces of humanity from the face.

Ami felt her hackles rise. Her Reaper had looked much more human and, well, reliable than that. Charismatic too, in the sense that he looked like a leader around which troops could rally. With his large, jutting chin he had - and he would have hated this assessment - looked almost heroic. In contrast, this one looked as if it had rabies and wanted to hunt you down and kill you.

"I think we have a pretty good idea now about what happened to

Umbra," Cathy said with a glance at the blood-encrusted scythe that rested upright against the red demon's shoulders.

"With all these spiders, this has to be Arachne," Jered declared. More nervously, he asked "We are going to assault this place only after we have built up a massive army, right? I, for one, would like to maintain a respectful distance between myself and Rabies over there at all times."

Ami nodded. "There's really no point in attempting an assault with less than an overwhelming amount of automatons."

"Why does Arachne have a reaper? I thought they were almost extinct!" Snyder whined.

"Looks like she dug it up," Jadeite said, pointing at the excavation shaft that led to the beast's lair. A new and sturdy-looking steel gate blocked the entrance.

"Yes, some other Keeper must have imprisoned it there," Jered agreed. "Look at all the rubble underneath the corpses and the mess of gauges in the wall. There's nothing of the original masonry left. It must have been down there a for long time."

Ami thought back to her arrival in this world. "Um, do Keepers often bury reapers in abandoned dungeons?"

"It's more common than one would think, apparently," a wrinkly warlock chimed in. "Doesn't surprise me much, though. By all accounts, they have quite the temper and a tendency to lose it. More trouble than they are worth in many cases."

"I know that I'd try to get rid of one as soon as I no longer needed it," Cathy agreed. "Would you want to keep something like that around if you didn't really have to, Mercury?" Cathy pointed at the grisly room to underline her point.

The blue-haired girl didn't answer, since she was following some other train of thought. "So the Keepers just seal them away in case they still need them later?"

"That, sacrificing them would anger the gods, and permanently

killing them off can be tricky," the warlock said. "In fact, there's a theory that they disappeared not because they went extinct, but because they were too bloody annoying and got themselves buried alive. Just think of the opportunities if that's true! The underground in old Keeper territories could be full of them, all just waiting to be discovered!"

"What a cheerful thought." Cathy's tone left no doubt that she considered the idea less than reassuring.

"In light of the news that the enemy has a reaper she can deploy almost everywhere she wishes on her territory, we need to re-adjust our strategy," Ami said, putting her hands together as she walked up to the throne. "It's possible that I need to interfere personally against an opponent like that, and I have to be in range of my Keeper powers to do so. Unfortunately, I can't safely leave my dungeon until the blood sample Zarekos managed to steal from me has been retrieved."

Cathy nodded. "Makes sense. Do you know where it is?"

"Yes," Ami's watery Keeper hand appeared, glittering with colours as it moved through the light beams projecting the large Avatar Islands map onto the wall. "I traced its location using some of my blood. It's right there!" The ambulant limb's index finger stabbed down into the middle of the red Keeper territory.

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Skirmishing

Originally on 2010-09-19T23:24:00

"Dumat, what exactly is she *doing*?" King Albrecht leaned over the shoulder of his court wizard to get a better look at the image in the glowing crystal ball.

"My liege, would you terribly mind backing off a bit? That ermine trimming of your mantle tickles something terrible in my neck," the twitching magician stooped over the scrying device complained.

"Yes, I would. Your pointy hat is obstructing my view." Despite the elderly monarch's protest, he took a step away from the blue-clad wizard's chair. He opted to shove a swaying pile of books aside to make room next to the magic user. "You could have the apprentices tidy up your laboratory from time to time, old friend," he commented with a sideways glance at the cramped study, where bookshelves, alembics, and bubbling glasses left barely enough room to walk. His royal mantle had gotten caught twice on some corner or other when he had entered, for the Light's sake!

"Ah, you know how the youngsters are. Always giving a test tube here a shake and twirling a wand there, and then wondering why their knees suddenly bend backwards or their beard turned green. Besides, I know exactly where everything is that I need. However, to get back to your question," he peered deeper into the cloudy glass, "I think Mercury is trying to attract some vampires."

"Think some will bite?" the king said, grinning at his own joke. His face fell when he got a better look at the vision within the arcane sphere. A fly as big as a man, with a fanged maw instead of the mouthparts of its smaller cousins, zoomed across a blasted wasteland underneath a rust-red sky. A spray of crimson rained down from two tiny buckets strapped to its limbs. On the ground, the dark liquid almost blended in with the ashen tones, except where it painted red dots onto a white-and-blue-tiled path that ran straight like an arrow over the uneven landscape. "That's blood, isn't it? Not

very subtle. Fresh, too. What kind of atrocities is she performing to get that much?"

Dumat waved his long-fingered hand over the crystal ball. "Show us," he muttered to the artifact. "See for yourself, my liege."

In the crystal ball, a large round trough appeared, with a red-eyed female silhouette looming behind it. Keeper Mercury herself, King Albrecht realised with a start. A bug-eyed little creature sprang from the villainess' hand, somersaulted above the half-filled container, and stopped in mid-air. Mercury closed her raised hand into a fist, cruelly squeezing the lifeblood out of the hovering imp. She flung the crushed corpse aside like so much dirt. It rolled down a short slope, where a few waiting goblins dragged the clump of mangled flesh and broken bones away.

"That's vile," Albrecht said, almost spitting. To bring a servant into the world, only to kill it the moment it came to life? Fortunately, his glimpse of the disgusting proceedings remained short, because the crystal ball fogged up from within. "Looks like she is onto your spying."

Dumat let out a long sigh. "She does not like being observed at all. The moment she notices me, she conjures up a mist that stymies my best efforts to see through it. It is incredibly frustrating."

"Perhaps he should leave the spying to me," a third voice intruded from behind the two elderly man. Faint notes of amusement swung in the spymaster's voice, belying the harshness of the statement. "My liege," the hooded and cloaked man said in greeting as he bowed to Albrecht. "Dumat." Another bow, less deeply than to the monarch. "I brought the dossiers you requested." With soundless steps, he navigated through the maze of shelves and magical trinkets, searching for a sufficiently empty spot to sit down on.

"Ah, there you are. You just missed Keeper Mercury making imp juice," King Albrecht said, having expected his chief informant's arrival. "Should that go into her file?" he asked with a questioning glance at Dumat.

The wizard rubbed his chin and frowned. "I don't think it's all that

important. I find that her rats are a much more alarming development."

"Rats?" Albrecht raised an eyebrow.

"Yes, my King. I think it will be easiest if I show you." The wizard concentrated and coaxed his scrying glass to show a filthy pit in Mercury's dungeon. A moment later, the two observers were treated to another sight of the lifeless imp whose unfortunate fate they had witnessed earlier. Thankfully, not much could be seen under the carpet of feeding rodents covering it.

"Disgusting." Albrecht stared at the pile of grey fur and wriggling pink tails with distaste. "Now, why would the Keeper's puzzling choice to surround herself with vermin be a cause for concern?"

"This is not what I wanted to show you," Dumat said, frowning. He picked up a long tin wand from a stuffed, half-open drawer and whacked the orb in front of him. The picture within wobbled and switched to an outside shot. Tiny rodents hopped over scorched and cracked ground, pausing from time to time to perform a short dance on their hind legs. In their wake, they left a straight and even road covered with white and blue tiles. "She can make them do *imp's work!*", the magician said, drawing out the last two words to stress how important this was.

"Now that IS alarming," Albrecht concurred. "Not as worrisome as Arachne's damned spiders, though. Blasted pipe-crawling little monsters. I still can't go to the bathroom without fearing that one of those accursed things is going to jump at me from underneath again!" With a scowl, he turned to the spymaster, who had sat down on a trunk that nearly spilled over with papers. "Has Leopold found her newest hideout yet?" The cloaked man shook his head in the negative. "Too bad. Anyway, make a note to acquire more cats, will you? That will make my granddaughter happy, at least. She loves kittens."

"Noted," the spymaster confirmed. "Her use of rats seems consistent with her latest appearance in the Eastern Barony. Villagers reported a tide of rats before the debacle at the temple, if you remember."

"How could I ever forget the humiliation of a contingent of guards and an entire temple full of priests failing to stop a single tentacle monster?" Albrecht growled. "She's a sly one, that Mercury. At least now we have an inkling of why she wanted that particular creature back so badly that she was willing to let Leopold go for it."

"Truly a paragon of its kind," Dumat muttered. "To think we assumed that she was using it merely to sate her deviant appetites."

"So, how much of your time with the crystal ball did you spend trying to catch her sating said appetites?" the spymaster teased.

"None," Dumat sputtered.

Albrecht knew his old comrade to be a very honest man, who had great trouble squeezing a lie through his throat. The resulting higher pitch sounded much like what had just come from the man's lips. "Well, by all accounts, she is a pretty young woman," the king waggled his eyebrows knowingly at the wizard.

Dumat cleared his throat. "I don't like what you are implying," he squeaked. "Besides, I caught a glimpse of her true form once." He shuddered. "It's nothing to drool over."

"Oh?" Interested, Albrecht leaned in closer, and he could see his spymaster do the same.

Paper rustled as the cloaked man opened his notes to a certain page. "A true form you say? She answered that she was human when on trial, according to the copies of the recordings that I was able to acquire from the neighbouring country," the spymaster contradicted. "The divine truth detection confirmed her statement."

"A cunning deception. She is human, but only partly so," the white-bearded man crowed.

Albrecht nodded his head slowly. This kind of half-truth was one aspect where the magic could have problems with. "So what does she really look like?"

"She is much more demon than we thought, my liege," Dumat answered. He raised his hands to the sides of his head and made

arcing motions. "She has horns, and greenish-blue tinted hair, coarse like the bristles of a boar. She is also taller and more muscular than the disguise she wears most of the time, with reddish skin and black stripes covering parts of her face."

A pen scratched over paper as the spymaster scribbled the new information down under the rumours section of his file. "Are you sure she wasn't just possessing some minion?" he asked.

"Please, what do you take me for, a wet-behind-the ears initiate? That was my first thought, but her face didn't change much at all." Dumat crossed his arms, allowing the glow in the crystal ball to dim and go out.

"That does not sound particularly like any kind of demon that I'm familiar with," King Albrecht said, rubbing his chin. "Hmm. See if you can't develop some summoning spell, specifically for her, will you? She might just be sufficiently demonic for it to work." He snickered inwardly at the thought of Mercury's face when she would suddenly find herself bound within a ritual circle, surrounded by a whole score of brave knights and battle monks. There was a reason why the demonic races were not particularly successful as Keepers.

"As you wish, my liege. I will need permission to study the forbidden archives, of course." Even as the court wizard, Dumat did not have the authority to freely study the more sinister lores, and demon summoning was as dark an art as it got.

"I'll make the necessary arrangements with the church," Albrecht promised. "Now, what about our main worry? Is Mercury trying to control the weather?"

"It's hard to tell, your Majesty." Dumat shrugged his lanky shoulders. "Where her domain expands, storm and flooding follows. For the most part, her lands are veiled with steam clouds resulting from torrential rain pouring into open lava. I cannot discern whether this is intentional or not."

"Hmm." Albrecht rapped his knuckles against the wood of the table as he thought. "Is this going to increase the corruption levels, and should we expect any repercussions over here?"

"Actually, the maelstrom of fire in the sky is at the faintest it has been since it first appeared. At this rate, it might even disappear completely. The skirmishing Keepers must be destroying dungeon hearts left and right." The spymaster looked up from his papers, and the "It vexes me that I have not been able to determine the identity of the other two primary Keepers yet."

"I am more worried about my subjects doing something stupid," Albrecht said. "Since Zarekos' defeat, many of the refugees from the Avatar Islands have become restless, and there is talk in certain circles about returning home and reclaiming the land. Never mind that they'd have to contend with the remaining undead, the inhospitable wasteland, and whatever Keeper comes out on top." The King returned his gaze onto the inert crystal ball. "Who do you think that will be, Dumat?"

"Not the vampires, my liege. The red Keeper has been losing territory in each altercation with either of the invaders, and has no income. It is only a matter of time before he will either be destroyed or subjugated by one of the others. It will come down to either Mercury or the yellow Keeper. Neither is putting much pressure on the other right now, though it seems that Yellow is slightly more competent at claiming and holding territory."

"I see." Albrecht was the one who had suggested referring to the unknown Keepers by the colour of the tiling they used for their dungeons. "Very well. Let's check on the dangers closer to home now."

Ami's heart skipped a beat when the knowledge that her dungeon had been breached poured like a bucketful of ice water into her brain. She immediately knew where - one of the long, remote tendrils of her territory extending to the south was under attack by Arachne's imps. Again. This kind of interruption had become distressingly common over the last day. Couldn't she leave her in peace for a while? With exasperation, Ami took note of the assortment of spiders behind the bug-eyed enemy digger. The crawlers were covering the ground with thick, gluey webbing that would spell doom to any rats she sent to reclaim the area. An

annoying and efficient tactic. With a sigh, the weary young Keeper yanked two of her reaperbots through space to deal with the problem. Both clanking automatons landed on the strip of blue tiles that the imp was just about to convert to the ochre yellow of its own master. With a startled squeal, the creature sprinted away, leaving the arachnids to face their momentarily disoriented metal foes on their own. Ami could almost imagine the gleeful expressions on the faces of her goblin pilots as they made their towering machines stomp toward their much smaller targets. A sudden movement behind her troops startled her. A mound of ash that had looked like all the others exploded upward, and a red blur lunged out of the resulting dust cloud. Almost too fast for the young Keeper' mental sight to follow, and certainly too fast for the automatons to turn toward the danger, a diagonal strike bisected the right of her reaperbots from the shoulders to the hips. Its metal parted with a surprisingly low amount of noise before the preternaturally sharp scythe that tore through it.

"Darn it!" Ami yanked the other reaperbot through space as soon as her mind caught up with the action, but it was almost too late already. The frightening weapon of Arachne's horned reaper whistled through the air, cutting a nick into the remaining automaton's shell just as she made it disappear.

Deprived of his victim, the rabid-looking monster opened his fanged mouth and bellowed his rage at the fiery sky.

Still shaken by the ambush, Ami gritted her teeth. If only the battle had taken place closer to her or her dungeon heart, then she could have targeted the murderous being with a spell. Unfortunately, the narrow path of territory that her rats had secured extended far outside of the effective range of her dungeon heart. The evil monster wasn't stupid enough to step on that strip of claimed territory, or she could have targeted it anyway. Ami wanted him gone, since he had disrupted her efforts to blockade Arachne's expansion again and again. With a swirl of snowflakes, she disappeared from her dungeon and reappeared high in the sky above the site of the battle, where she hovered in Tiger's body. Since the enemy creature was not on her territory, she couldn't keep track of it with her Keeper sight, but a quick sweep of the landscape with her visor located the

white-eyed demon easily enough. An instant later, she hit him with a stored Shabon Spray Freezing that materialised right in front of him, giving him no chance to defend himself. Almost as soon as the prison of ice encased the scaly monster's lean body, it went milky and opaque from the sheer amount of fractures that spread from within. With a roar that shattered the encasing ice, the reaper stepped out of the cloud of shards - and right into the path of a giant fist of water that slammed into him like a freight train and embedded him into the ground hard enough to make cracks run through the dry soil metres away. For good measure, Ami hit the monster with a searing lightning bolt from her fingers that was bright enough to almost blind her. When the dark spots before her eyes cleared, the area around the empty imprint of the reaper in the soil below was glowing like embers. Still, the creature was gone, no doubt withdrawn by its Keeper. Her fists clenched in disappointed frustration. Well aware that she had just given away her position, she cleared away the remains of the destroyed reaperbot and directed her watery hand to go after the fleeing enemy imp. At least she would get something out of this, she thought as she teleported away with a flare of blue light.

The imp let out a high-pitched squeal of fright as Ami's animated hand released it from its grip and dropped it into a cage-like prison. Immediately, the stench of blood assaulted the tiny, brownish-green-skinned creature's nose. It ducked its head and glanced left and right with wide-open, fist-sized eyes. It wasn't alone in its cell. Three more imps, one in the colour of its master, two wearing the red rags of the hated enemy in the east, were huddling together and shaking like leaves. The trio was staring fixedly at something outside of the cage. Reluctantly, the new arrival turned its head and followed their gaze. It fell upon clean-nibbled imp bones being carried past by a pair of goblins. A few rats with red-stained snouts were dancing around their feet and jumping toward the grisly remains from time to time, squeaking hungrily. The imp whimpered, already imagining itself devoured alive by the rodents.

A buzzing noise that got louder and louder drew its attention to the right. A large fly with a sea-blue carapace descended from above,

approaching through a row of pillars. The wind from its rapidly-beating wings almost toppled the captured imp. The insect carried two buckets like a honeybee would carry gathered pollen. It pulled into a shallow dive, aiming straight for a large trough whose contents were not visible from the tiny minion's vantage point. Never stopping, the insect dipped its legs and the buckets into the container and pulled up again, with its limbs painted red and its buckets full. Its wings fanned a sickening, coppery smell toward the prisoners.

The quivering imp didn't even follow the giant fly with its eyes as it swerved around and returned the way it had come, leaving a thin trail of red droplets in its wake. The worker had spotted something far more terrifying standing behind the blood-filled vat. The horned, red-eyed female with striped skin could only be Keeper Mercury herself, and she was hovering an imp upside-down over the grisly tub. The newest prisoner hadn't even noticed when it had scuttled over and joined the other imps in their huddle, but their body heat felt somewhat comforting. Not nearly enough. It quaked as the enemy looked straight at it when the bones of her unfortunate victim cracked and fresh blood splashed down into the trough. To the imp's horror, she flung the wrung-out body aside and approached, floating unnaturally through the air.

"You have a choice, my little prisoners," she spoke. "You can join me and serve me alive, or," she raised her thumb over her shoulder and pointed at the bloody vat, "you can serve me in death. Which will it be?"

The imps that had already been in the cell rushed forward, extending their hands through the bars toward the approaching Keeper. An imp's life was hard, no matter whom they served, and they held little loyalty to their employers. It came as no surprise that they eagerly took the offered opportunity to remain among the living. All but the newest arrival, who pressed itself against the back of the cage and let out a wail of deepest despair. It knew what was coming next when it felt its backpack grow hot.

Deafening thunder robbed Ami of her sense of hearing, and she

found herself flung backwards as something in the cell with her newest prospective minions exploded. As if frozen in time, she saw parts of the metal bars zoom past her face, and then a bone-crushing impact drove the breath from her borrowed lungs as she crashed through the wooden wall of the blood vat. Everything went black.

"Mercury! Mercury! Are you all right?"

Ami felt a hand on her right shoulder, gently shaking her. Reluctantly, she opened her eyes. Cathy's face, framed by blonde hair, hovered over her, surrounded by nothing but various shades of blood-red.

The teenager in the body of a youma opened her mouth to talk, but could only produce a gurgle. With a disgusted cough, she spat out the cold blood that filled her mouth and tried again. "Eww!" Seeing the swordswoman's alarmed expression, Ami groaned and quickly added "Don't worry, it isn't mine. That would be blue."

"Oh." Cathy's eyes lingered on the walls coated entirely in red, much like the possessed youma lying in front of her. The heavy footsteps of the troop of reaperbots taking guard positions around the two females sent ripples through the shallow pool of blood covering the ground.

"Ow!" Ami winced as she tried to get up and her borrowed body protested. Reluctantly, she let herself sink back into the sticky red wetness. "Poor Tiger. I'm really abusing her body."

"Be glad she's tough and that it wasn't your real body instead," Jered said. The weasel-featured man was advancing only slowly, since he contemplated each individual footstep in order to minimise the contact of his shoes with the red liquid on the ground.

"Well, what happened?" the blonde wanted to know. "Were you attacked? This place looks like an abattoir that has been hit by trollish explosive!"

"Arachne got tired of Mercury stealing her imps," Jered answered in Ami's place, half-guessing. "So she hid a little surprise on that last

one."

"Yes," Ami confirmed with another groan. "I really should have seen that one coming."

"Oh well, no permanent harm done. Jadeite said that youma recover from anything that doesn't kill them outright. There's other good news too!" Jered paused as he waited for Mercury to get up, but instead of pulling herself painfully to her feet with the aid of Cathy's offered hand, the girl simply levitated off the ground and remained lying in mid-air.

"Yes?" The bluish-green-haired girl directed a hopeful smile at Jered.

"The warlocks have found out what the vampire Keeper is up to. His minions are manning a giant ram and trying to smash through a huge fortified door in the depths of his dungeon."

"What's behind it?" Ami wanted to know, her interest piqued.

"The interior is dark, the scrying does not reveal anything. We'll need your help there. Are you feeling up to it?" Jered asked with a grin. "It's bound to be valuable."

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A Surprise for Nero

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Ami glanced through the padded bars into Tiger's comfortable cell and felt a twinge of guilt at the sight of the mentally damaged youma, who was lying on the bed and letting out a soft groan from time to time. One of the few imps Ami had stolen from the other Keepers darted inside at the noise. Following her standing orders, it fed a piece of conjured apple to the patient. The magically copied piece of fruit disappeared between the orange lips with a loud smacking noise.

Cathy cocked her head as she watched the spectacle. "She's so faking it," the swordswoman declared after a while.

Ami remained dubious. "Ah, I' don't think she has the mental capacity for deception."

"Doesn't take much intelligence. We had a dog who used to do that all the time," the blonde said. "You healed her up, right? No cursed wounds or anything, so she should be completely fine."

"I'm going to let her rest anyway," Ami decided. "Mareki will do just as well, even if I'm clumsier in that form. I'll make sure to be back before the enemy has a chance to react!"

Mareki's body floated back and forth in front of the scrying windows that lined the walls of Ami's command centre. Her burning, crimson-coloured eyes took in the various black screens targeting the interior of the vault as Ami tried to get a good grip on the situation.

"This is so embarrassing," an unhappy voice in the back of Ami's mind muttered as she caught a partial reflection of her senshi-uniformed body in the glass.

Instead of paying attention to the youma's complaint, Ami floated up

behind one of the warlocks operating the vertical divining pools and looked over his head at the picture within. The man's shoulders stiffened as she drifted closer, and he quickly leaned aside on his chair so she had a better view. An enormous portcullis gleamed metallic in the torchlight. Ami assumed that the wide cavern in front of it had been dug out by imps only recently in order to make room for a ram. The siege engine was as long as a bus and looked as if it weighted about as much. Even as she watched, vampires and skeletons gripped the handles of the massive device and moved it forward, breaking into a run. Ami's eyes widened slightly as the flames of the torches flickered from the power of the impact, and small pebbles trickled from the ceiling. The ram bounced back, dragging robed bloodsuckers along, and revealed that the gate had merely been dented by the violent assault.

"They should just dig through the walls." Mareki declared from somewhere inside Ami's skull.

"They look like fortified dungeon walls," the young Keeper answered, accompanying the thought with a mental picture of sad-looking imps having their picks bounce ineffectually off of masonry engraved with demonic grimaces. *"I haven't been able to test yet whether crystal hearts produce stronger walls, or whether they simply provide their imps with weaker picks. In any case, there's no getting through."* Ami didn't miss that this implied an active dungeon heart somewhere within the sealed chambers, possibly with its own defenders. One not aligned with the undead who were trying to force their way in. She held out her left hand, and her clawed fingers closed around a crystal ball that popped into existence.

"Were the images sufficiently accurate for you to fix the target location firmly in your mind, my Keeper?" one of the warlocks asked with a sycophantic smile.

Ami ignored him and looked down at her crystal ball, which showed the ram being readied for another blow. Judging from the size of the dent that the previous one had made, Ami concluded that it would take hours for them to break down the gate. She would have no trouble locating the chamber, since the vial of blood stolen from her was inside. "Yes, I'm all set to go."

"Joy," the voice in her head muttered quietly, *"I hope she won't break my record of being the only youma in her employ who hasn't been mangled in some way yet. Thank the Great Ruler for my tail that keeps her away from me most of the time."*

Ami noticed the appendage in question swish around behind her, forcing one of the seated warlocks to duck lest it slap him on the cheek. *"I'm going to be excessively cautious,"* she promised.

"Ack! You heard that? I meant no disrespect, my Lady! I'll try to think quieter from now on!"

Ami could feel the consciousness of the youma curl up into a ball that radiated nervousness and worry. As far as she could tell, it had just occurred to Mareki that she should definitely not think about anything that she didn't want her current employer to know, with predictable success.

"Sorry for the inconvenience, but you are my only choice right now, Ami apologised, trying to distract her. She didn't really want to know that one of the trolls reminded the youma of an old boyfriend, and she already knew that Mareki didn't do much more than hanging around and being lazy all day.

"How so, if I may ask? You have lots of other minions."

"They explode if I try to use a Dark Kingdom style teleport while in their bodies. They simply aren't conditioned the right way to deal with that power. With Umbra and Tiger hurt, you remain as the only available option."

"That's not true, you know," Mareki contradicted. *"General Jadeite is a perfectly viable alternative!"*

"What? I couldn't! That would be- well- " Ami blurted out in her mind, feeling blood rush to her cheeks.

"Mercury, are you all right?" Jered asked, eyeing the whitening knuckles around Ami's grip on the crystal ball curiously.

"F-fine." Ami took a deep breath, glad that Mareki wasn't asking any further questions. From the corner of her mind that contained the

youma, she could feel exasperated disapproval gushing outward.

"...should just jump his bones and get it over with already..." the teenager could make out from Mareki's train of thought, and the accompanying mental pictures were enough to make her choke in absolute mortification.

"Don't be so crude!"

"Are you sure you are all right, Mercury?" Jered asked at the sight of the startled young Keeper bobbing up and down in the air as if she had just missed a step.

"It's nothing. Mareki just thought something startling. There will be no further problems."

Ami got the impression that her co-inhabitant gulped. *"Please,"* the youma said, *"I didn't mean to offend! I can't help thinking what I think!"*

"Let's just get this over with as quickly as possible," Ami said, trying to cut the awkwardness short. In response, Mareki radiated heart-felt approval.

With her fire-protection spell at full power, Ami appeared within the flaming cloud cover. She couldn't see the ground through the burning gases all around her, but that was fine with her. The fiery clouds would hide her from any ground-based observation with their glow, especially here near the centre of the continent-spanning spiral. While she had to perceive a target to direct a remote spell at it, she didn't have to do so with her own eyes. Squinting because of the glare and holding her breath to avoid breathing in whatever fuelled the flames, she concentrated on the crystal ball in her hand. What mattered was that she was close enough to affect the dungeon directly below. Resisting the urge to laugh because of the flames tickling her skin, she shifted the image to the vault door and then through it. As expected, the scrying device went dark, mirroring the state of the room beyond. With a theatrical snap of her fingers, Ami channelled magic and projected a light spell into the chamber.

"Shouldn't something happen?" Mareki asked when the crystal ball stubbornly remained black.

Only a few seconds had passed, and Ami wasted a few more by blinking at the image.

"Maybe there's something in the way from this angle that blocks sight?" She rapidly tested this theory by casting a random scatter of light spells in the general area and moving the crystal ball's vantage point, with similarly underwhelming results.

The scrying device remained stubbornly inert. Ami was in problem-analysing mode now. *"Either it's solid rock, which is unlikely, since the door is buckling inwards under the ram's blows, or my magic doesn't get through, or it is shielded against scrying. Wait, my magic does get through. I was able to locate the blood vial within."*

"As long as all of my blood remains within my body," Mareki grumbled just on the threshold of where Ami could listen in to her thoughts.

"That means it must be shielded against scrying somehow." That left two possibilities. This could be a temple to the dark gods, in which case she needed to get in and retrieve the blood as soon as possible. Who knew what those evil and powerful creatures could do if they had a link like that? Ami shivered at the thought of someone like Azzathra being able to track down her soul somehow. The other possibility was that someone from the mortal world had figured out how to stop magical spying, in which case she needed to get in there and learn the secret! Attracting one of the vampires to her side and questioning it became more and more pressing. In any case, she would have to focus her war effort on this opponent first. With a thought, she disappeared out of the inferno in the sky.

The clinking of coins drew Keeper Nero to his portal. If his current arachnid body would have permitted it, he would have grinned and rubbed his hands at the sight of the large cocoon filled with gold that was being dragged in by a trio of strong-legged black spiders. One of the sheep-sized arachnids hissed a warning in his direction and

clicked its mandibles, only to be kicked aside by the largest one, who turned to stare at Nero with blood-red eyes.

"Mistress Arachne! What an honour."

"Take a proper form when you are talking to me!" Arachne growled from a throat that was not intended to produce human noises. To Nero, it sounded like an asthmatic tuba.

"Yes Mistress! Of course, Mistress!" Showing off his newest trick, he detached from the spider he had possessed and turned into a black swarm of insects. His myriad of tiny bodies converged into a single column until it mimicked his human appearance like a wriggling mosaic. It bowed with a flourish, taking off a pointy hat that also consisted of crawling insects.

Sadly, Arachne seemed less than impressed. "You built a temple? Do you really have the spare coin to waste on such frivolousness?"

"It keeps *him* happy. Happier," the neophyte Keeper explained with a nervous glance down a corridor. "Speaking of him, I'd appreciate it if you kept your voice down," the swarm of vermin that was Nero hummed quietly.

"Ah, yes, your reaper. Quite the find. It will make the next phase of our plan much easier."

Insects skittered up the composite's brow as it raised an eyebrow. Nero wasn't aware that his mission statement was more complex than 'assassinate Mercury'. "I'm all ears."

"I'm sure you are." Arachne waved one of her black spider legs, and a tome with golden covers appeared before her and floated toward Nero. "Have a look at this. I got it cheaply off Midori."

The former warlock flipped through the pages, using his Keeper powers rather than his simulated fingers. "Hmm. I can see why. This spell is powerful, but much too risky to use."

"Uh-huh. That's exactly what I thought about it, too," the huge spider chirped cheerfully. "That's why you are going to cast it for me!"

"Wha-?" The book clattered to the floor as it slipped from Nero's grasp, taking a finger composed of ant-like beetles along. "But Mistress! There is no need for that yet! My plans are progressing well, and I almost got Mercury with a bomb a little earlier today. Just grant me some more time to-"

"Silence. This plan has a much higher chance of success than anything you'd come up with on your own. You'll do it, or I'll simply replace you with someone who will."

"Yes, Mistress." Nero hung his head. Possible death later beat certain death right now. Now the huge sack of gold, much larger than Arachne's usual contribution, made sense too. It was fuel for that accursed spell.

"That's a good little minion. Fret not, I have also provided you with additional troops. Seven whale carcasses filled with my darling spiders are washing up at the shore as we speak." The master Keeper's voice remained much too cheerful for Nero's liking, but he perked up a bit at this news.

This *could* work, if he went smartly about mitigating the dangers. Considering his reaper, he would even end up in a position of strength afterwards. Provided that he survived, of course. Sounding more bitter than was advisable to let on when addressing his superior, he asked "I assume you have the next steps already planned out too?"

Fortunately, Arachne didn't seem to be in one of her more tyrannical moods. "How nice of you to ask! As a matter of fact, I do. First, you will have to send your imps..."

"Ah, yes, I must say that this went well indeed," Snyder said, shouting to make himself heard over the loud hammering, hissing, and clanking that came from the doorway behind him. "Not that there was any doubt that a demonstration of my considerable abilities would win them over, of course, but for a moment, I feared that they would not grant us sufficient time to explain."

Ami's satisfied smile didn't waver. "In retrospect, the trolls might have felt threatened when I removed the warlocks and goblins from the room and closed the doors." She glanced over her shoulder at the sturdy iron door that lead to her new forges deep underground. "They must have thought it was a prelude to some sort of purge."

Snyder nodded. "I am only glad that I managed to demonstrate your sincerity about your religious tolerance before they decided that they should use your shiny new cranes and equipment to pour a vat full of molten metal on us."

"And damage their shiny new forges and smelters? Fat chance!" Ami only half-joked, hiding a giggle behind her hand. The greenskins seemed very enamoured with her the new, larger assembly line and spent most of their free time around the anvils and workshops.

"True, true. I suppose-"

Suddenly, Ami noticed her long shadow on the ground grow even longer as something blocked the orange light pouring in through the doorway. Thus, she had a split-second warning before something pounced on her from behind, but she certainly hadn't expected long, slender arm to snake around her and pull her into a crushing hug. The two large, soft mounds pressing into the back of her head and the vacant squeal of "Cuuuuuuuuute!" were also incongruous with an attack. Ami was too stunned to react, and Snyder was no help at all. The redhead just gaped open-mouthed, his brown eyes going wide. Utterly confused, the blue-haired teenager didn't react until she felt her assailant's hands wander upwards to less innocent places, accompanied by a happy sigh. That did it. With an outraged choking yelp, Ami transported herself out of the fondling embrace and to the other end of the hallway. With her face as red as a tomato, she whirled around, ready to give the half-naked albino who had just groped her a piece of her mind. Before she could utter the first word, someone roughly pulled the statuesque dark elf back by the black leather strap that struggled to protect her chest area's decency.

"Venna, no! Let go of the Keeper this instant!" The second dark elf, who was dressed in a much more modest outfit consisting of a linen shirt and leggings, hesitated. Partly because she had just noticed

that Mercury had already freed herself, partly because her tug had caused the under-dressed elven barnacle to stagger against her. She flinched when she saw Mercury stare at them with crossed arms, crimson eyes glowing brightly.

"Explain."

"Forgive her, Keeper," the bald woman sputtered. A few drops of sweat shone on her forehead. She raised her right index finger to her forehead and made circling motions. "Venna can't help it! She hasn't been all there since Morrigan experimented on her to make her more to his liking," she continued in the same breath. Completely misinterpreting the Keeper's deepening scowl, she elaborated "That doesn't mean she's useless! She's absolutely fierce in combat! He only removed her grasp of social mores and her fashion sense!"

"Hey!" the dark elf in question threw an offended glance at the other woman, then pulled herself loose with a deft sidestep.

"Morrigan did that to her?" Ami's expression softened as her perception of the scantily-clad dark elf shifted from scary molester to victim of a Keeper's depravity. "That's monstrous. Snyder, see what you can do to help her."

"I'll- gah, please stop that, Miss- eek!" The acolyte had trouble talking, since Venna was leaning over him, pinching his cheek and mussing up his bowl cut affectionately. He blushed and backed away into the wall until he finally managed to snag one of her wrists. At once, he started dragging her away almost at a run, attempting to maximise the distance between himself and the white-skinned woman without letting go. "Please follow me to my workroom!"

"A splendid idea," Venna purred.

"Eeep!"

Ami took pity on him and transported both of them to the infirmary, separating them in the process, and turned to the remaining warrior. "Well, Eline, was it?"

The albino elf nodded so fast that her pointy ears wiggled. "Yes, my Keeper."

"Will he be safe with her?"

"I think so. She's not violent, just clingy. She tends to go for the short ones, so just put her into a tall team to avoid most of her quirks," Eline advised. "Or into one with members of a sufficiently different-looking species."

"I see." Ami felt a bit of relief at the last part. She had been worried for her goblins there for a moment. "She's a good friend of yours, then?"

"We- we watch out for each other occasionally," the dark elf admitted, shifting from one foot to the other as if she had been caught doing something inappropriate.

Recognising the woman's discomfort with the topic, Ami changed the subject. "Anyway, what were the two of you doing down here?"

"Visiting the trolls to see if we could score some better equipment," the dark elf explained and patted the crossbow slung over her back. "Maybe a few magical daggers or bolts, or a few pieces of armour that they cobble together in their free time."

Ami blinked. "Is there something wrong with the standard issue gear?"

"Oh, it's fine, but, well. It never hurts to have the qualitative edge, and I'm not too comfortable entrusting my safety to goblins, even if those remote armours they are using are totally sweet!" Eline paused and swallowed once. Ami thought she was gathering her courage before going on. "Err, would it be possible to have one of those made for me? One for wearing, that is, not a remote model. I heard you used a similar one when you duelled a horned reaper, and I think it would be a good idea to equip all of your important soldiers like that. Morrigan may be banished for now, but he does have a few minions who can teleport, and he just loves using them to assassinate important enemy underlings. Or traitors."

"Well, my version needs too much power to be used by someone who isn't a Keeper," Ami answered. On the other hand, the amount of reaperbots her trolls were churning out was already past the limit of what she could simultaneously operate with the current output of her gem production. Using their skill to better outfit her regular troops instead wasn't a bad option at all. With all the practise her workers had putting together the standard model, variants fitted for individuals shouldn't be too much trouble. "Hmm. They'd have to be mundane ,except during emergencies. Weaker too, since the wearer has to be able to move comfortably under his own power, and there's not much room for the fuel." She focused her gaze back on Eline, who had silently waited for Mercury to finish thinking out aloud. "Yes, I think there's-"

"Argh! Some help here, quick!" A telepathic message interrupted.

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Bad Neighbours

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With a bell-like ringing tone, Marda rammed her armoured shoulder into the rubble that blocked her path. She let out a satisfied grunt when the rocks and debris clattered inward, stirring up dry dust that caked her armour. "Finally a tunnel that's still accessible. Men, get digging!"

"Yes, Lord," one of the eight broad-shouldered trolls accompanying her replied. His stocky silhouette was barely visible in the dim light falling in through the collapsed ceiling. "Damn it. I'd hoped this excursion would be a break from digging in the dirt," he complained while he poked and hacked at the detritus left by the cave-in. "Can't we go for an easier target?"

"The others I know of are even harder to get into," Marda said while fighting against one of the larger boulders, wheezing from the effort. At last, the block that was almost as tall as she was gave and slid aside. With a loud crash, it toppled inward, leaving a hole big enough to crawl through in the natural barrier. "I'd hoped that Mercury would have dealt with this one already, since it's close to her dungeon, but she's as unpredictable as ever."

"Wish I was in her dungeon right now having a good meal," muttered one of the green-skinned workers and vented his frustration on the rocks with furious hammer strikes.

"Whatever. Get over here with the torches," Marda snapped as her ears picked up the familiar clattering noises of bony feet walking on stone floor. She detached her own warhammer from her belt and gripped the haft with both hands. "The welcoming committee is upon us."

Marda angled her arm and caught an incoming sabre on the ringmail covering her forearm. Without breaking her stride, she countered by

ramming the bottom of her torch through the attacking skeleton's skull while she walked past, deeper into the abandoned dungeon. Behind her, she could hear bones crack as her troops stepped on the remains as they tried to keep up with her. None of the creatures so far would have been a challenge for even one of them, and for her, they were almost below notice. No, the only reason her eyes were sweeping the decrepit walls and cracked floors in meticulous search patters was the danger that some traps remained functional. This far down in solid bedrock, she was no longer worried about the possibility of further cave-ins. Her greatest inconvenience were the layers of dust that painted all surfaces a dull, monotonous grey. Not only did they cover every suspicious nook and cranny, they also stirred at the slightest breeze and made her eyes water. She heard a sneeze from her side and gritted her teeth as the expelled air blew another cloud of mouldy particles into the air. "Watch it," she grumbled.

"Sorry, boss," the offending troll sniffled. "It's this rotten dust. How far to the dungeon heart?"

Marda swept the dust off of one of the cyclopean pillars that supported the ceiling of the vast underground chamber, tearing a black rent into the bleak cover. It revealed geometrical patterns that had been carved into the black stone with impeccable artistry. "I'd say this was once part of Mukrezar's own chambers. Only the best for the bastard," the troll stated with barely suppressed rage. Her armoured fist crashed into the intricate carvings, crushing them into sand. "Thus, it should be nearby somewhere." Marda froze and lifted her torch-bearing hand, signalling to the others to stop and remain silent. "Shush. Did you hear that?"

The other trolls remained motionless as they emulated their leader and listened into the darkness. "Doesn't sound like a heartbeat," one commented, sounding mildly disappointed. "Close though. Footsteps? Not a skeleton." A short clattering noise disturbed the tomb-like silence "Now that sounded like a shattering skeleton all right!" the same warrior added as the stomping noises resumed.

Something about their cadence made Marda feel uneasy, and she could feel goosebumps form under her mail coif. "Those footsteps sound familiar, but I can't quite put my finger on it. Proceed with

caution." From that point on, she moved much more quietly than could be reasonably expected from a heavily-built troll in armour, making no more noise than her loincloth-wearing companions. She was leading the group toward the footsteps, of course. It was better than combing the place at random in the hopes of stumbling upon the inert dungeon heart by chance, and she didn't believe there was anything active on the continent that could stand against her and a group of her veterans. Certain blue-haired Keepers included. However, the other intruder seemed to have an identical train of thought, since he felt no need to mask his presence. In fact, the footsteps were approaching. Whatever it was had to be somewhere around the next bend. The footsteps stopped, to be replaced by loud sniffing noises that sounded like a scenting animal sucking air into its nostrils.

In full combat formation, split into three squads of three that guarded each other's flanks, the trolls darted around the corner. Marda bit back a curse when she spotted the athletic red figure that was facing them, its scythe raised in anticipation. "Rabixtrel," she hissed, tightening her grip on her war hammer. She had hoped he had perished in the tumultuous times since Mukrezar's reign.

The horned beast's blank white eyes opened a bit further, but none of the murderous intent faded from its features. If anything, its fanged grin widened as it took a thundering step forward, its hoof shaking the stone.

From the corners of her eyes, Marda could see her trolls quail at the mere sight of the monster. "Steady! None of you attack him from the front! Fall back to the big hall!"

The demon charged, ploughed through the dust clouds that his rapid advance stirred up and causing them to swirl like moth-eaten wings in his wake.

"Here we go again," Marda sighed. Then, the monster was upon her, snorting sulphurous breath from his nose slits as his scythe sliced through the air in a wicked downward curve. Her outline blurring with the same kind of acceleration magic that the reaper was using, she charged forward so that only the haft of the weapon hit her shoulder, rather than the deadly cutting edge. She let the

blow catapult her to the right, aligning her feet with the wall. As soon as her soles made contact with the bricks, she launched herself off the vertical surface and sped toward the reaper like a green and angry dart, adding her considerable momentum to the swing of her warhammer. The crimson demon tried to protect his side, but a burst of forge fire summoned up by one of Marda's allies struck his face. The flames did no harm, but obstructing his vision just long enough for the head of Marda's weapon to crash into his ribs. He grunted in pain, despite the ghostly armour that flickered into sight above the impact location just before the steel could burrow in his flesh. Unfortunately, the hit didn't even make him stagger, and he made Marda pay for her aggression with a furious backhanded blow that crushed her collarbone. Or at least that had been his plan, but the agile troll somehow slipped underneath the strike, slammed her shoulder into his belly, hooked her leg around his knee, and heaved. With a textbook throw, she lifted the lean demon off his feet and rolled him down her back, then spun around and raised her hammer as if she wanted to drive a nail through his prone body. She received a hoof to her face for her trouble when reaper reared up instead of lying dazedly. The kick lifted her off her feet and send her skidding down the corridor, trailing sparks as her chainmail screeched over the stone tiles. She blinked to clear the stars from her eyes and immediately grabbed the proffered hands of her warriors to pull herself back to her feet. Damnation, that had hurt. Her ears were still buzzing.

"These must be Mercury's minions," the strange hum seemed to say, "leave one alive to interrogate!"

Wait, the hum was real! There was a cloud of insects surrounding the horned monster who was stomping her way. Which meant... "Retreat, now!" Even though the blow Marda had taken had rattled her more than she was willing to admit, she still believed that they could defeat the reaper. Unfortunately, she knew they couldn't defeat him *and* his allies. Him not being on his own changed *everything*.

Her warriors were more than happy to obey that command and dashed off, backtracking the way they had come. Soon, she could see only the bobbing torches as they retreated. Marda herself

followed at a more sedate pace, since she knew that trolls couldn't outrun a reaper with their shorter legs. Someone had to slow the beast down. *Or kill it,* the voice of the ever-present shard of cold fury in the back of her mind insisted. Behind Marda, the echoing thumps of sprinting hooves ceased, and Marda threw herself aside, being aware that the demon could leap a distance of over five mens' length if he so desired. Just as planned, his leap carried him past her, and she darted in to strike at his back. As if it had a life of its own, his huge scythe lashed out when he reversed his grip, more than happy to trade taking a hit for a chance at eviscerating her. She threw her weight back as the claw-like blade shot upward toward her stomach and brushed past her warhammer with a screech of tortured metal. She heard a low thud in the dust and grimaced at the suddenly lighter weapon in her hand. The head of the hammer was gone, cut cleanly off the metal haft. *Looks like old Rabixtrel learned a new trick.*

Recovering from her surprise, Marda dashed toward the towering monster and collided with him, now past the effective range of his lethal blade. The sharp knee protector part of his greaves thrust upwards, aimed at her pelvis. *Physically superior or not, I'm still better than this thing!* Marda thought and used the rising knee as a stepping stone to bring herself into reach of his face. With the torch in one hand and the stump of her weapon in the other, she met the murderous demon's eyes for a split second. A triumphant smile played around her wide lips as she brought down both rods to stab them through these hateful white orbs, through the eye sockets, and into the brain behind. That was when a fanged mouth like a bear trap closed around her left forearm. The finger-long spikes that were the demon's teeth almost managed to get through the chainmail, but Marda had different problems than just the painful pinpricks piercing her leathery skin. The grey environment turned into horizontal blurs as the red monster spun her around in a circle by the captured arm, and she could feel some bones popping from the strain. Suddenly, the pressure was gone, and she hurtled uncontrolled through the air. This was going to hurt, she realised when a stone pillar grew rapidly in her vision. Like a cannonball, she impacted the column with enough force to shatter it. Bruised all over, she scowled in pain as more debris rained down on her chest and rattled her armour. Furious, she spat out a bloody tooth. If it wasn't for this accursed

body throwing off her balance, she would show him! She'd- probably die, since he had just tagged her with his slowing spell. Feeling as if she was trying to move through viscous mud, Marda stemmed her wobbly good arm against the ground as she tried to get up and dodge the huge monster leaping at her.

"Argh! Some help here, quick!"

Ami managed to locate Marda just as a section of broken pillar smashed into the reaper at the apex of his jump, shattering against his chest and throwing off his landing just enough that the blade of his scythe stabbed into the ground between the prone troll's legs, rather than pinning her to the ground like an insect. Ami didn't believe there was time for further delay, and yanked the militant troll through space and deposited her nearby on the floor. "Marda! What happened?"

"Ow! Don't ask stupid questions while there's a reaper to kill!" the green-skinned warrior shouted. Clenching her teeth together, she tried to sit up, but had to abort the motion with a hiss of pain, not caring at all about Eline gaping at the perceived disrespect.

"Right. Reaper," Ami confirmed with a wide-eyed look at the dark blood that was seeping through the twisted metal rings constituting Marda's armour.

"We'll talk later, Eline," she said and dropped the troll into Snyder's lap, figuratively speaking. She caught a glimpse of the acolyte fending off Venna's attempts to climb just there. The redhead seemed rather grateful for the excuse to push the well-endowed albino away and rush toward the new patient who had appeared on one of the infirmary beds. Ami teleported herself over to the command centre and commandeered one of the scrying windows, ignoring the startled squawk of the warlock she unseated and dumped onto the next closest chair. She stared into the water behind the vertical glass, and the location from which she had just picked Marda appeared. It was empty. However, she only had to follow the hoof-shaped footprints in the dust to find the fearsome demon, who was sprinting toward a panicked-looking troll who was

moving as if he was underwater. Glad that the red demon was within range, she hit him straight on with a stashed-away Shabon Spray Freezing. She would start worrying about what he was doing so close to her lands after she had stopped him.

The reaper encased in ice continued onwards at his previous speed as his slippery cage slid over the floor and straight into a wall, where it shattered. This time, the red monstrosity was fast enough to throw himself aside when Ami's watery fist appeared and cratered the wall where he had just been standing.

Ami frowned when moving the giant limb became much harder after the demon made a strange gesture with three fingers of his left hand. Before she could move the sluggish mass of water aside, the reaper sliced into it with his scythe again and again, reminding her of a homicidal blender with his many spins and arcing blows. The expression of uncomprehending fury on his face when the successful attacks failed to do more than get his weapon wet brought a smile to her lips. It died when he walked - not dodged - walked around her next swing, which would have done no damage in the first place since the fist of water was moving slow as molasses. Trying something new, the vexed reaper attacked by whacking the floating hand with the flat of his blade, sending water fountaining with each strike and dispersing the limb bit by bit. With a satisfied snort, he walked through the puddle that remained of his target, and turned his head in the direction of the fleeing trolls. Ami struck him from behind with a new fist and embedded him face-first in the wall. Dragging crumbling bricks along, he pulled himself out of the cracked surface and bellowed in rage, loud enough that Ami could see dust trickle down from the shaking masonry. Barely an instant later, he had put her incoming hand under his slowing spell. Her attack hit him straight on and had about as much effect as if she had thrown a pillow at him. And now the cocky bastard was just walking through it as if it wasn't worth his time. *"Well, if he's inviting me to do this,"* the young Keeper thought, grinning as she drew upon her gold reserves and felt magic soar through her veins in response. An instant later, her lightning bolt lit up the corridors and turned the mass of water containing the reaper into rolling clouds of boiling steam. "Finally got him!" she called, thrusting her fist into the air.

"Indeed, my Lady," one of the warlocks said, tapping his fingertips together nervously. "But, um, he doesn't appear to be dead, I regret to inform you."

Ami's face fell and the crimson light in her eyes intensified as she peered closer at the screen. Not only was the demon not dead, he was still standing! He wasn't unharmed, since she could see muscles twitch underneath his red-scaled skin, disrupting the smoothness of his motions, but still! "Darn it! What does it take to keep that monster down?" Ami drew more power from her treasury. *If at first you don't succeed...*

As if sensing her intention, the reaper broke into a run, and his blurring red form darted out Ami's zone of vision. With a suppressed grumble, she concentrated on readjusting her point of view, only to have the creature dart sideways into a passage as soon as she had him in her sights again. Naturally, she gave chase. This time, she unleashed her lightning bolt as soon as she caught a hint of red. It gauged molten scars into the walls, but the reaper had already zigzagged and backtracked the way he had come, slipping out of her sight again. All the dust stirred up by the thunderclap following her spell didn't make finding him any easier. Ami focused once more. There! No, gone again. Where? Up? The arch from which he had been dangling by one hand disintegrated into a cloud of debris and molted slag. Missed again! So did her Shabon Spray Freezing when the nimble demon twisted out of the way unexpectedly and disappeared into another of the narrow side passages. Their many twists and turns made it difficult for her to maintain line-of-sight. *Is he taunting me?* she wondered as the beast continued leading her on a merry chase. She didn't really have the money yet to waste spells frivolously, she reminded herself even as her eyes narrowed. Ah, there he was-

"-cury! MERCURY! Get down!"

Ami's aiming was rudely interrupted when Cathy tackled her and threw her aside. The room spun around the blue-haired girl as the two rolled over the hard ground, away from the seat she had just occupied. She screamed in pain when a strong electrical shock coursed through her body, undoubtedly caused by the intense flash that seemed to leech all colour from the room. She wasn't the only

one affected. The pained squeals of the surrounding warlocks merged with the bang of her chair exploding into kindling under the action of an arcing blue bolt of lightning. "W-what-"

"Dammit, move! You aren't the only one who can project spells! Get us out of here!" the Cathy shouted into Mercury's ear, her long blonde hair standing on end.

In sudden appalled understanding, Ami teleported herself out of the command centre, taking the woman draped protectively over her along. "Shabon Spray!" Shivering, and not from the sudden cold mists, the blue-haired girl looked at Cathy. "What happened?"

"Your warning bracelet started glowing, and your little device was suddenly beeping like mad, but you weren't paying attention," the swordswoman said as she picked herself off the floor. "I saw some sparks gather in the air above you and just reacted!"

"Are we safe now?" Ami's head whipped left and right as she stared wide-eyed up at the ceiling from her prone position, searching for any signs of a renewed attack. A moment later, her visor slid over her eyes.

"Well, your bracelet isn't glowing. The enemy probably can't see us through your fog."

"Good. WAIT!" Ami's heart skipped a beat as the implications hit her, and cold sweat appeared on her brow. "Arachne could still be scrying on some other room and pick off whoever she wants! I need to move everyone! I need to spread more mist, and I need to find the Keeper!" she blurted out, hyperventilating as she tried to figure out how to react properly to this kind of emergency.

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Both Sides Prepare

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"You have to make sure you are safe first and foremost," Cathy snapped at her pale Keeper, who was stepping from one foot on the other and shifting her weight as if she couldn't decide in which direction she should dash off first. "Go possess something!"

Ami paused, her panicked train of thought momentarily derailed. Egotistically prioritising her own well-being didn't come naturally to her, but in this case, her scar-faced adviser had a point. If she died, those she was responsible for would be overrun by the enemy in short order. Who should she- Tiger! She would be helpless if targeted within her cell, and letting the unstable youma just mix freely with the others was a recipe for disaster. "Right," she nodded, and grabbed the orange-skinned creature from her bed and gently landed her next to herself. *It's creepy how much she's starting to resemble me,* she noted with some uneasiness for the short moment she could see the black-striped, muscular body from the outside. An instant later, her perspective shifted and her consciousness settled within the borrowed form that welcomed her like a familiar, well-worn glove. With the lack of adrenaline flooding this body's system, a measure of calmness returned to her. Was anyone outside the areas she had remotely flooded with her protective mist? She quickly plucked Jadeite from Metallia's temple, where he was fishing for more youma minions, and deposited him in the library. The giant flies were vacating the clammy, foggy areas on purpose, but she wasn't worried about them. As mere animals, they were low-priority targets. The trolls working the forges in the mainland parts of her dungeon should be able to detect hostile scrying on their own, given their particular abilities. They only needed to know that there was actual danger. Ami concentrated, feeling her left eye tingle as she activated her communication spell and projected a broadcast to all creatures within the dungeon. *"Attention everyone! The dungeon is under magical attack! Immediately vacate an area as soon as you detect scrying! Please find the nearest group of warlocks able to cast strong shielding spells and remain with them. Seek out mist-*

shrouded rooms for additional protection!"

"That will work, I think. Leopold's wizards were able to protect his advancing troops against Arachne's bombardment when they were working together." Cathy's blue eyes glanced at Mercury's wrist that lacked a warning bracelet in the new body. "We should get Snyder to craft some more of those!"

"He's busy right now," Ami said tensely. In her mental view, the redhead was leaning over Marda and trying to remove her blood-drenched chain mail, but the troll wasn't being all that cooperative. At least he had some assistance in the form of Venna, who was steadying her arms on the recalcitrant patient's head and pressing it down into the pillow. A bare instant later, the vacant expression on her face was replaced by a grimace of pain, and she hopped through the room, waving her bitten fingers. With all the bouncing and the occasional nervous looks at the ceiling, it was no wonder that the poor acolyte wasn't making much progress.

"Ow! Dolt! Leave me alone, I will fix it myself!" Marda howled when he poked a tender spot by accident.

"Now, now. I assure you that- "

"Shut up! Mercury, I know you are watching! That reaper wasn't alone in those tunnels. If I was you, I'd check them to see if you can't find whoever is attacking."

"Will do," Mercury confirmed, forgetting for the moment that the troll couldn't hear her. She directed her Keeper sight back to the command centre and checked on the warlocks who had been near her when the bolt of lightning struck. To her relief, everyone was still moving. Nevertheless, the magicians were not unharmed. She could see the angry red patterns of light burns on exposed skin,with more injuries bound to be hidden underneath those voluminous robes. They needed care, but Snyder had his hands full. Hmm. With a blue flash, Ami appeared in her workshop, where the sweltering heat of the forges immediately melted the snowflakes accompanying her teleport. She had no trouble seeing through the banks of conjured fog that shone orange from all the fires. If she had more time, she would have admired the criss-crossing shadows cast by the multiple

light sources and the stone pillars supporting the vaults. Instead, she floated quickly over to a troll wearing a thick leather apron, who was hammering red-hot metal on an anvil. Ami had to actually poke him in the shoulder to get his attention over all the noise, and motioned for him to follow her into a quieter corner. "Do some of you know how to treat burn wounds? Snyder needs some help in the infirmary. Marda is in there, too."

The troll glanced over at the many open fires and searing hot melting pots. "We sure do. What's happening?"

"Please point out who," Ami continued quickly, "so I can move them immediately. I'll send you along so you can explain to them why. I can't tell you right now, I need to defend the dungeon!"

"All right, Keeper," the greenskin said and pointed with a sausage-like finger at various of the pot-bellied workers. Each one disappeared, and swirls of mist rushed into the humanoid vacuums they left behind.

After acquiring about half a dozen assistants for Snyder, Ami gathered up the wounded and hoped the new "nurses" knew what they were doing. She wiped the sweat from her brow, glad that no further attack had been reported so far. Focusing her will, she transported herself back to the command centre, bringing Cathy along. She stopped in front of the command chair and addressed the remaining warlocks through the wafting clouds of Shabon Spray. "Half of you, prepare to raise a shield in case of further attack. The other half, help me find our attacker." Ami stabbed a claw-tipped finger down onto the map table, piercing the paper on a spot at the border of her territory. "Start searching the underground here! Cathy, activate the visor and warn us if you notice anything out of the ordinary!"

Nero chuckled into his crystal ball, spewing forth a few flies from his mouth with each breath. It was hilarious how Mercury's creatures scattered like frightened rabbits as soon as he looked into one of their rooms. He could be disruptive without casting a single harmful spell! That was a good thing, too, since he couldn't afford to go on

the offensive right now, no matter how tempting it was. He'd take a shot if he spotted the brat in her true body once again, of course, but his hopes for that were low. He could barely see through the fog she was filling her dungeon with. Quite the annoyance, really. No, he needed to conserve his money. He still had the big bag of gold intended for *that* spell, of course, but he couldn't touch that for other purposes if he wanted to live. If he wasn't a human-shaped clump of crawling insects right now, he would probably have shuddered at the thought of living - briefly - through one of Arachne's more creative execution methods. No, for now, he had to go along with her quite possibly fatal plan, which meant that he needed to limit his spending only to ameliorating the dangers. He should have known that the chance to become a Keeper himself was too good to be true!

"Get on with it already," a voice at his feet hissed in irritation. His master was here, possessing a tiny spider that was barely larger than his foot. From time to time, the arachnid plucked a bug out of the former warlock's leg and devoured it, causing him to wince.

Nero shrugged his shoulders and turned to the huge dark orb standing on its dais in front of him. The inactive dungeon heart glittered in the sparse light shining forth from the dark wizard's crimson eye slits. He extended a hand that consisted only of chitinous bodies, and a goblet filled with red liquid appeared within. His own blood, necessary to claim the abandoned relic for himself. Extracting the vitae from the preserved corpse of his original body had been a more disturbing experience than he had expected. He didn't like being confronted with reminders of his own mortality. With a jerk, he poured the blood onto the dungeon heart, and the rumbling heartbeat that responded from the artefact was much more to his liking. One more thing that anchored him to sweet, wonderful life.

"Finally. Try not to lose this base before my own preparations are complete. I would be most cross with you." The red light faded from the eight eyes of the borrowed spider body as Arachne's presence left it.

With a scowl, Nero immediately stomped on the unfortunate animal, relishing in the crunching sensation underneath his heel. He took in his barren surroundings in the white, pulsing light coming from the

dungeon heart, and shook his head. "This won't do at all. Imps! To me!"

"Found the target! And it's the fucking bastard who tortured Jered!" Cathy snarled as she spotted the pile of insects in the image of the warlock Nero. Her hands balled into fists, and she ground her teeth in anger as she let out a low growl. "Mercury, destroy him!"

The uncharacteristic venom in the blonde's shout drew Ami's attention as much as the words themselves. She stopped walking up and down the command centre and glancing at the scrying panes, where enemy imps were flitting through old tunnels and claiming them for a new master. *That was Nero, wasn't it?* Ami frowned, distorting the black stripes across Tiger's forehead. It took her a moment to identify the black insect swarm standing next to an active dungeon heart as Arachne's former head torturer, but when she did, she felt anger flare up at the horrid memories of what he had done. Her feelings toward him matched Cathy's. "With pleasure," she answered, and a hard look entered her crimson-glowing eyes. Gold disappeared from her treasury, and a wavering ball of brilliant flame formed between her cupped hands, lighting up the large chamber like a sunset. In the blink of an eye, the fiery orb disappeared. At the same time, the scrying window showing the enemy Keeper turned bright white and lighted the room with its glare. Ami leaned toward the dimming glass in anticipation, waiting for the flames to die down. She smiled when the scorched black surfaces of the chamber became visible through the smoke, with only a few red embers glowing where the fire storm had incinerated impurities. Even the dungeon heart had gone inactiv- wait. Ami's elation vanished before it could fully manifest when white light poured from crack-like patterns on the orb's surface. It hadn't gone dark, it was merely covered in a layer of soot that was flaking off now. Had Nero managed to dodge her spell? She peered closer at the beating orb. It should have been protected from the magic, but it looked as if it was bleeding? She observed the black stuff trickling down from the crystal and gathering in between the three statues on whose shoulders it rested. Suddenly, she realised that it was a bunch of black-carapaced insects. Once the swarm had gathered enough

mass, it crawled out from underneath the dungeon heart and piled up into the form of the Keeper she had just incinerated. A superior smirk appeared on the warlock's simulated features, and he spread his arms and pirouetted on one leg, as if he wanted to rub in the futility of Mercury's attack. After the theatrical gesture, he floated upwards until the spherical dungeon heart shone behind him like a crystal sun, and drifted into it, disappearing entirely.

"Keeper, you'll want to see this!" a warlock shouted, craning his neck so he could see over his shoulder, past his jutting collar. His long fingers were pointing at the glass screen before him.

Ami was at his side in an instant and gasped. The landscape seemed to have come alive from all the eight-legged bodies moving in formation over the open wasteland. "Arachne's troops! Where?"

"They are coming from the coast and moving toward the location you indicated," the warlock explained, stroking his beard.

Ami quietly counted the rows and columns of the very spread-out enemy army to get some idea of their number. It wasn't easy to keep track of the hairy creatures in the craggy territory. Five lines at least, each one more than twenty arachnids long. Over a hundred total.

"There are more of them in the tunnels," another warlock alerted Ami to the presence of more enemies within Nero's new stronghold.

"We should intercept them," Cathy declared. "That bastard needs to be put down like the mad dog he is! This is almost at our border, right? Let's deploy the automatons!"

"They are close, but I don't want to deploy them on the surface." Ami summoned her computer and did a few quick calculations. "They are not going to hold up if Arachne uses the enlarging spell. We'll need to engage in the tunnels."

"Well, then do that! Or pick them off with your spells," the blonde demanded heatedly.

"I can't. They are too spread out for me to catch more than one in a spell, and I can't take the time to squish them all one by one right

now."

"Oh? What's so important that it takes precedence over this?" Cathy put her arms akimbo and glared at Mercury, who gulped nervously under the intense stare and ducked her head.

"I have to upgrade the control devices," Ami justified herself, pointing at the coffin-like capsules for the goblins. "If the enemy struck again, they would be sitting ducks in there, since they can't move! I need to add some shielding! What good would it do if I deployed the reaperbots right now, only to have them all go inactive in enemy territory? I also have to dig some fortifications to stop Nero's imps from making inroads into my territory, and I have to organise everyone getting new equipment, and I also need to develop shelters! And the reaper is also running around somewhere!"

Cathy snorted, her cheeks an angry red, but nodded once. "Fine. I don't agree with waiting, but you are the boss. He's only going to get harder to dislodge the longer we wait, you know!"

Ami looked thoughtful, and addressed a long-nosed warlock in purple robes, who was striding along the scrying stations and taking notes. "Erasmus, what seems to be the enemy Keeper's plan?"

The black-haired man looked up from his sheets and stopped walking. "His imps are focusing on fortifying the dungeon and expanding the hallways, presumably in order to accommodate the enlargement spell you mentioned earlier. Additionally, some are digging deep pits. If I had to guess, I would say that they are intended to be used as natural barriers. That would be consistent with the amount of traps that the Keeper is producing, to the exclusion of anything else. We have not spotted any new rooms going up yet."

"And what do you think this means?" Ami asked when it became apparent that the man would not continue after summarising the facts.

"Either he is paranoid about you launching an immediate attack before he can get settled in, or he wants his dungeon protected so

that his army remains free to launch attacks. I am no strategist, however, and defer to your wisdom on such matters."

"I will upgrade the border defences," Ami decided after a bit of thought. "He'll have to enter my territory to attack, and the reaperbots will be nearly unstoppable in narrow tunnels, where his spiders can't surround them. This will buy us some time for preparations."

"Nobody has ever won a war only by defending," Cathy pointed out, crossing her arms in front of her chest.

"The longer he waits, the more gold-generating infrastructure I can set up on the mainland," Ami directed a thought at the blonde, unwilling to divulge the source of her wealth to the other employees. *"We grow stronger at a much faster rate than he does, and I get the feeling that we will need all the advantages we can get."*

Nurgil flapped his bat wings, following the delicious scent of blood as he fluttered across the storm-darkened landscape. Never mind that the liquid smelled stale and weak in potency, it was better than nothing at all. His tiny body playfully dodged the heavy raindrops whipped around by the winds as he navigated closer to the source of the smell. He was in no hurry to get to his destination. In fact, he greatly suspected that this was some kind of trap. He probably wouldn't be taking the risk right now if his current Keeper, Wemos, wasn't an idiot. Nurgil had never intended to serve him, but, well, what could you do if a stronger enemy had you by the throat and you didn't have a coffin to revive in? Seething inside, the vampire reflected on his Keeper's suicidal stupidity that would no doubt get him and his underlings killed. No money? Well, there was an easy solution! Rebuild a portal and then go to the nearest Underworld city, plunder its riches and gorge yourself on the inhabitants.

The tiny bat shook its head in disgust. What a moron. A moron powerful enough to come out on top in the vampire free-for-all, but a moron no less. Not even Zarekos at the height of his power had dared do that, no matter how much he wished to. One did not mess with the Underworld settlements. Not only did they have the

manpower and the mutual protection treaties to retaliate with overwhelming force against such transgressions, it also tended to piss off the gods. Besides, they could grant free passage to any heroes who wanted to use the portals as a back door into a Keeper's fortress.

The smarter vampires under Wemos' command were currently looking for better employment options among the local Keepers. Nurgil cursed under his breath. He couldn't even just flee through one of the portals now. After the dolt's actions, the best any vampire arriving through an Avatar Islands portal could hope for was a quick lynching. Which left two choices. Most of his compatriots were leaning toward the yellow Keeper, because he had a reaper under his command. Nurgil was heading toward the blue territory though, mainly because the yellow Keeper had a reaper under his command. He just hoped that all the blood was an invitation, rather than bait.

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Nero's Spell (Part 1) (DARK)

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"Good morning, Cathy," Jered called when the door opened and his girlfriend strode in. The dark circles under her eyes told him that her sleep hadn't been as restful as she would have liked. "Bad night?"

"Yeah," the blonde nodded and hid a yawn behind her hand. "As if the worry about a bolt from the blue while asleep wasn't enough to keep me awake, the goblins snore, too. A lot. Besides, having a warlock stand over your bed is creepy."

"I'm not looking forward to it, either," Jered said. Mercury had decreed that during this time of danger, everyone had to sleep in shifts and in common dorms. He agreed with the decision, since it meant that groups of warlocks could stand guard and ward off enemy attack spells, but it wasn't what he would consider pleasant. It didn't help his mood either that the rooms were gender-segregated.

"I didn't get much rest at all," his girlfriend continued.

"At least you got to sleep during the actual night shift," the brown-haired man comforted her.

"I suppose that's something." She paused as her sleep-addled brain caught up with processing the unusual visual input it was receiving. Blinking, she moved up closer, put her hand on his chest, and tapped with her knuckles against the silvery plate that had replaced his usual green shirt. "Nice armour."

"Indeed, but I have no idea how I'm supposed to sneak around in this," Jered grumbled while Cathy walked around him, inspecting him from all sides. "It was Mercury's idea to provide everyone with protective equipment."

"Everyone? Sounds expensive."

Jered briefly looked left and right to see if they were alone in the corridor. "Very. Don't worry, she can afford it. The latest batch of gems was a big one."

"I see." Cathy took a step back and looked the man in front of her up and down once more. "Well, aren't you the dashing knight now? You look almost respectable," the blonde teased, then giggled.

"Eh, I don't think any respected knightly order would go for a bone motif," the wavy-haired man pointed at the skeletal protrusions decorating the full plate mail. "Mercury says it's insulated against lightning and can move in synch with the wearer when activated. Boosts strength and speed in that case, but it's a cheap knock-off of her earlier model. Not too much protection besides the obvious, either. Its fairly light and thin, as you can see."

"No other enchantments?"

"Hah, no. She's running the warlocks ragged as is. Guard duty, helping out in the workshop, staffing the command centre, forging magical trinkets and consumables- that reminds me..." He rummaged in a satchel he had affixed to his ever-present bandoleer of daggers, and pulled out a ceramic disc with three embossed runes. "Here, that's for you. I acquired an extra."

Cathy looked at the ceramic amulet resting on her open palm and traced the golden lines with one finger. "Magical? What does it do?"

"One-use shield charm. Crack it to release the spell. It's meant as an emergency defence. We should also go to the workshop so we can get you properly armoured up, too."

"Sweet. This thing is getting a bit old," the blonde banged her fist against the breastplate covering the chest part of her Sailor Mercury uniform. "Let's go there-" she paused when her stomach growled, and adjusted her plans slightly, "after breakfast."

Sitting across a small table from the lanky, dark-robed vampire she had just hired, Ami felt unsettled by his proximity. Her eyes kept

flitting to the faint smear of red around his thin lips. For her own safety, she had hired him by using her communication spell for the purpose it had originally been developed - enticing enemies to change sides. In this particular case, not much convincing had been required, since his former Keeper had obviously managed to anger him sufficiently to let him overcome his minion bond.Even knowing that he could not harm her as long as he served her, his intense stare made her feel as if he wished to eat her next. However, she wasn't going to pass up an opportunity to get some first-hand intelligence about her more remote opponent just because the pale figure made her hackles rise, and especially after going through all that trouble to attract him in the first place. "Well then, Nurgil, I am very interested in what your former Keeper is doing. What is behind that door he is trying to break down?"

The seated vampire refilled the red-tinted stein in his hand with imp blood from the open barrel next to him before he spoke. "That would be Zarekos' temple."

"A temple to the dark gods?" Ami couldn't entirely keep the disappointment from her voice. She had rather hoped that the vial with her blood wasn't in such a place.

"You misunderstand. It is a temple to *himself*. Quite the grandiose construction, indeed. His statue alone is thirteen stories high. It took thousands of minions almost fifteen years to painstakingly carve it from the rock, and it was not yet entirely finished when you invaded."

"He thought he was a god?" Ami asked, intrigued by the new information. She had only exchanged a few words with the late emperor of the Avatar Islands, but his actions had given her no reason to doubt his sanity.

Nurgil took a long sip of blood before answering. "No, Keeper, he was not that delusional. Planning to become one, perhaps, but well aware of his own limitations."

The tiger-striped girl's eyes widened. "Ascend to godhood? Is that even possible?" *Was that a way to get her soul back, and did it involve anything she would want no part of?*

Nurgil shrugged his shoulders. "Who knows? Zarekos was a genius in the fields of thaumaturgy and sorcery. I won't pretend that I understand even half of his research. Whether his actions were based on well-founded theory, or simply the desperate flailing of a madman trying to free himself from this blasted wasteland, I cannot tell." He took another sip from his glass. "Demented as the idea may seem, he was indeed able to derive some power from the prayers of the lesser undead he kept within the structure. Perhaps, given time, he might have achieved his goal."

Ami remained silent for a while as she pondered the news and wondered about the implications of apotheosis. Even if it was possible, was it something she would want? She didn't know all that much about the gods, but there was one thing she was sure they were not: human. In any case, she had more pressing concerns. "Is your former Keeper seeking the temple's power?"

"I rather doubt it would work for anyone else without rebuilding it from the ground up," Nurgil said, waving his bony fingers dismissively. "As for Wemos' motives - well, I suppose he intends to plunder it. The late Master used it as a repository for things he wanted to keep out of our hands, since the interior is surrounded by a water-filled trench. He may also wish to add the worshippers to his forces."

"How many does the temple hold?"

"I do not know precisely, but it is filled to the brim with the lesser undead. Skeletons kneel in supplication before the statues, and the air is thick with densely-packed ghosts. Low thousands, I would estimate."

Ami gasped involuntarily at the vampire's dispassionate description. The numbers involved were higher than she had expected.

"I wouldn't worry about them just yet," Nurgil continued, "since Wemos will be busy for quite some time pressing them all into his service and keeping them from simply wandering off. Which reminds me," he put the stein down and pushed it aside, "Have you started working on the graveyard I require?"

"I did set a room aside for it in the eastern part of the dungeon," Ami said, suppressing a wince at the reminder that her conversation partner was, in fact, one of the living dead. "However, I suspect that there is more to it than just a tomb and a few coffins?"

The vampire nodded gravely. "Indeed there is. I shall reproduce the necessary schematics for you, if given access to a suitably-stocked library. While I am only familiar with the design in general, I have no doubt that I can reproduce its entirety if I can consult the literature for some of the finer details."

"That's agreeable. I'll construct a small workroom here in the water-free part of the dungeon." Ami paused, and looked almost embarrassed before she continued. If she had been an outside observer, she would have been vaguely amused at the sight of a tall youma putting her hands together in front of herself like a fidgeting schoolgirl. "Um, I'm afraid you'll have to work on your own, though. The warlocks don't like vampires for some reason, and won't agree to help."

"Not unexpected. They are jealous of the magical gifts that come naturally to us, and which they waste most of their mortal lifespan in pursuit of."

"That sounds like a weak reason," Ami said, not taking her eyes of the creature's spindly fingers that never ceased moving. *I find it more likely that they take offence to the hungry predator feeling that you are giving off,* she thought, but didn't say.

"Well, I suppose it doesn't help that the brainy types taste better," Nurgil allowed. "Of course, as per our agreement, I shall restrain my appetite," he added with a winning grin that made his fangs gleam.

Somehow, Ami didn't feel very reassured.

Jered and Cathy walked past the various dimly-lit alcoves that lined the walls of Mercury's workshop much like small shops would line a busy street. Hammering noises, hissing, and odd smells assaulted the wavy-haired man's senses as the various greenskins inside

worked with metal. He also spotted the violet hues of warlock robes moving about in the smoke and mist as the magicians mixed alchemical substances or cast spells over crucibles. He clanked along on his way, still trying to get used to his new suit of armour, and almost bumped into his girlfriend when she stopped to have a longer look into one of the smithies. "What's up?"

"I'm wondering how they make those individual suits of armour so fast," the blonde said. "It's not like one size fits all." Within the cluttered alcove stood one of the dark elves, her white skin contrasting strongly with the sooty walls. She was in her undies and pulling down the hem of her brown shirt, glaring all the while at a warlock standing close enough to violate her personal space. However, it turned out that his interest in her bare legs was at least partly professional. He muttered a few incantations and wriggled his fingers, and the piece of armour that the troll kneeling in front of her was affixing to her legs changed shape to better fit around her calves. This didn't stop her from glaring at him, though.

"Transformation magic? Won't they revert back?" Cathy whispered.

Jered shook his head. "That's not the final armour, just a conjured place holder. Look!"

The troll unfastened the boots and greaves and disassembled them into several pieces, which he handed over to an assistant. The other troll placed each individual part into a separate container full of viscous potter's clay and covered them with the substance, taking great care to fill in all holes and to remove any air bubbles. Meanwhile, the warlock murmured a spell over a finished suit of plate mail that stood against the back wall and produced a copy of a different part.

"Oh, I see. They use them to bake moulds," Cathy said as she watched the prepared clay trays being shoved into a kiln.

"Yeah, when the conjured pieces have dissipated, they only need to pour steel into the hollows," Jered said. "Assembly and making sure all the joints and enchantments work properly takes a while, though."

"So where can I get my own?" the blonde asked, hooked her arm around Jered's, and pulled him along when the dark elf shot a nasty look at the two uninvited observers.

"Over there." Jered pointed further down the hall at one of the reddish-glowing openings in the back. "That's where I got mine."

"Back already? Does the armour need some adjustments?" a cranky troll wearing a leather apron frowned at Jered's when the knight-like figure approached.

"No, we are here for Cathy," the weasel-featured man said, nodding toward the tall woman standing next to him.

The troll cocked his head as he took in the blonde's senshi outfit. "Nah. No armour for her."

"Excuse me?" The swordswoman's voice could have cut steel, and she underlined her very vocal protest by putting her arms akimbo and glowering down on the shorter creature.

Unimpressed, the pot-bellied greenskin picked his nose. "You heard me. Keeper's orders."

"What? Why?"

With a sigh, the troll stopped his disgusting activity. "Because you are supposed to get a copy of her own version, whenever that's done. Something about it putting too much strain on the average creature, though I don't see why some silly skirt," he pointed with his dirty index finger at Cathy's blue fuku, "would help with that. Anyway, I'm not working on that, so go away."

"You don't look as if you are particularly busy right now, though," the swordswoman said, not mollified in the least. Suddenly, she perked up. "Did Mercury say anything about weapons?"

The troll suddenly looked uncertain. "No?"

"Good!" Cathy rubbed her hands and grinned. "I need a new sword. Two-hander, with as many enchantments as you can handle!"

"Everyone always wants a magic weapon," the broad-nosed creature grumbled and turned toward the doorway leading into his personal workspace. "Fine, follow me and-"

"NO! No, no, no. Venna, stop badgering that poor troll! You can't have form-fitting armour!" a loud female voice echoed through the hall, and heads turned in its direction.

Jered recognised the speaker as one of the dark elf prisoners whom Mercury had recruited. She was already wearing a suit of plate mail similar to his own. However, his gaze was irresistibly drawn to her companion, who was leaning down toward one of the smiths and putting her hands onto his anvil to steady herself. Her pose accentuated her long legs and shapely, white-skinned backside that was covered only by a few tiny straps of black leather.

"Ow!" Cathy's exclamation was accompanied by a clanging noise, and she rubbed her elbow while sending a death glare at the piece of metal covering Jered's ribs. He grinned. This armour idea just might have some merits, after all.

"Form-fitting armour. Hah, who'd even want a stupid thing like that, anyway?" the troll smith standing behind the anvil commented, leaning on his hammer and raising an eyebrow at the nearly nude elf.

"Me! And it's easy, too! A quick fire-immunity spell and a short dip in the molten metal would be all it takes!"

"Are you daft, woman? How would you breathe once the metal hardened? Or, you know, take it off?"

"Do I look like a smith to you? It's your job to make it work!"

"Forget it." The troll shook his head as Venna stomped off, and turned to the other dark elf. "Is she always like this?"

"Unfortunately. Just prepare the normal armour for her, she'll-"

A subdued splashing noise, followed by the troll's half-startled, half-angry shout interrupted Eline. "Argh! Someone, get that fool elf out of the smelter!"

Eline burrowed her face in her palm, then hurried after her unstable companion. "Venna! Come back here before the metal hardens!"

Cathy stared after the metal-coated female sprinting off into the distance, chased by several irate greenskins and leaving molten footprints in her wake. "Does this kind of thing happen often around here?"

"Not since we banned the goblins from the premises. You wanted a sword, yes? If so, come along and..."

"Hey Mercury, could you come over here and help with a little problem?"

Ami appeared next to Cathy in a flash of blue, still in Tiger's fuku-clad body. In her left hand, she held a wrench, and a spot of grease marred her left cheek. "Hello Cathy. What do you need help with?"

The blonde pointed at the ground. "One of your underlings got a bit stuck."

The young Keeper gasped and covered her mouth with one hand when she spotted Venna's head topping what looked like a well-endowed metal statue. The albino was starting to look bluish in the face.

"...told you so," Eline didn't even attempt to hide the smugness in her voice as she berated her incapacitated companion. "So did everyone else."

"Can you get her out of there?" the blonde swordswoman asked. "The trolls looked pretty eager to use some of their larger pliers and cutters to get her out of her self-inflicted confinement."

"Why is she- never mind." Ami nodded. "This shouldn't be too different from extracting someone from a crystal." She concentrated on the immobilised woman lying before her, and focused on transporting her - and only her - to a position a few meters to the right of where she was.

"Yargh!" Venna yelped when she appeared, separate from her metal coating."Ow! Ow! Ouch!"

"Is something wrong?" Ami asked worriedly as she gave the elf a quick once-over. She couldn't see any injuries, even if the elf's pale skin was reddening all over, and conjured a blanket to preserve the woman's non-existent modesty.

Eline giggled. "Add 'all body hair gets ripped out, painfully' to the list of reasons never to do this again." More serious, she bowed in Mercury's direction. "Thank you for your assistance, Keeper. I'm sure she will be quite happy with the standard armour from now on."

"Um, right. Try to keep her out of trouble."

"Hey, where did the metal go?" Cathy asked when she looked at the spot where the Venna-shaped armour should have been.

Three goblins walking on tiptoes, with the statue held over their heads, froze like deer in the headlight as the others became aware of their presence. Thinking quickly, the big-eared creatures dashed for the exit, not letting go of their prize.

"Eh? What was that all about?" the scar-faced blonde wondered.

Ami just shrugged her shoulders. "I'm already happy as long as they don't loot anything important. Is Jered already done teaching them about spider anatomy, then?" the currently teal-haired Keeper wanted to know.

"I think he called it a day once he got it into their heads that they should aim for the narrow part and stay away from the poisonous end. Say, are they going to get armour too?"

Ami shook her head. "No, I wouldn't be able to equip all of them. Besides, I need them as pilots, not as front line troops. Each of them has a few of the shield charms for personal protection, though. I am mainly focusing on making the new pilot hall safer. "

"New pilot hall?" Cathy asked.

"Oh, right, you haven't seen it yet." Ami said with a smile. "Hold on,

I'll show you!"

A moment later, the two appeared in a large, domed room whose raw ice ceiling glittered in blue tones.

"Whoa, you have been busy," the swordswoman said as she took in the spacious hall that hadn't been there the day before. She took a few steps through the hip-deep clouds of fog that drifted silently through the room. The hexagons covering the floor like honeycombs caught her attention, and she tapped against one with her foot.

"Having some captured imps helps a lot," Ami said. Noting the blonde's interest, she made an upward gesture with her fingers, and the six-sided metal column whose top Cathy had prodded rose out of the floor. "This are the new pilot pods," Ami explained as the capsule's door swung open. "They retract into the ground so they are safe from wide-area spells, and there are so many that the enemy shouldn't be able to easily target the occupied ones. The fog adds another layer of safety. I hope Jadeite can put up some illusions to fool scrying attempts, too, once we start using this place."

"Any idea when that will be?"

"Nero has been quiet and only fortifying his dungeon so far," Ami said, noticing how the blonde's hand went to the pommel of her sword at his name. "It will be either when he attempts to move out, or when we can afford to run the entire force of reaperbots. Can you go think up some assault plans in the meantime, please?" Ami lifted her wrench, "I don't have the time to spare between harassing his forces and maintaining the gem furnaces."

"Hah, there goes another one! Pay up," a black-bearded warlock thrust his fist in the air victoriously. He swivelled on his chair, away from his scrying window and toward the bald magician sitting to his left.

"That one doesn't count! It's still holding onto the ledge," the other man protested, pointing at the imp on the screen. The bug-eyed

creature was dangling precariously over a deep, dark chasm that glowed red at the bottom. It shuddered and gritted its teeth while it desperately dug its fingertips into the gaps between the cobblestones and held on for dear life.

"Oh." The first warlock's face fell. "Let go already, you cretinous little piece of filth! Your life isn't worth anything!" He hissed at the screen as if the imp could hear him.

"No, hold on little one! Don't give up," the other contradicted as he zoomed in on the life-and-death struggle.

"Don't cheer on the enemy, you moron!" the first warlock shouted. "That's treason!"

"I'll cheer on whoever I want if it makes me win the bet!"

"It won't," the other warlock said, sounding smug. "Look, the Keeper's going to finish what she started!"

On the screen, Ami's hand of water appeared over the bridge, approaching the imp it had previously failed to properly send tumbling to its doom. To the surprise of everyone involved, the disembodied limb billowed and shot off to the side, where it smashed into the yellow dungeon wall and dispersed.

"Hah, I win!" The pro-imp warlock grinned as a pale figure glided into the scene, trailing a waving black cloak. Standing on a cloud that obscured his feet, the vampire floated toward the dangling form and plucked it off its perch.

"Fucking bloodsuckers," the other warlock grumbled and crossed his arms in front of his weedy chest. His sour expression suddenly turned into a grin. "Well, will you look at that!"

On screen, the vampire turned the imp head-over, ripped its neck open, and guzzled down the blood as if he was chugging from a bottle.

"The imp's dead. I win!"

"No way! The Keeper didn't kill it, and now she never will! Pay up!"

"Like hell I will!"

The two glared at each other, moustaches quivering in anger. Their hands slowly inched toward their staves, but before they could resolve their conflict in a more violent way, the door to the command centre banged open. In an instant, the two sat with rigid backs on their chairs and stared intently into the glass panes.

Jadeite strode into the room, uncaring that the closing door wings behind him almost smacked Cathy in the face. "Give it a rest already! No matter how much you beg, I can't do it! It's not possible to portal magma into his dungeon if there isn't any in the local Underworld!"

"Aw, that's too bad," Cathy pouted "I really wanted to see that bastard roast again, even if he can survive it!"

"Take a look at the screens," Jered said as he walked in past the two. "He'd probably like it if you poured more lava into his dungeon, since he's doing such a good job of it all by himself." The wavy-haired man nodded in the direction of one of the active displays, where a red-glowing waterfall of molten rock poured from an open floodgate set in the wall. "He's currently draining one of the lava lakes on the surface into his complex."

"You call that a complex? It's just a giant pit!" The blonde swordswoman scratched her head as she followed the plummeting lava with her eyes. It plunged down into the darkness until it hit the bottom of the basin, where it pooled. "Any idea why he's trying to turn his dungeon into a fake volcano crater?"

"Defensibility," Jered guessed. "I'd say assaulting the dungeon heart over one of those rickety bridges would be pretty damn dangerous for anything that can't fly." The artefact in question stood on a steep rock spire that protruded like a stalagmite from the centre of the fiery lake.

"And he's adding lava because a drop like that *obviously* wouldn't be deadly enough on its own," Cathy criticised.

"Ah, I can shed some light on that, if you don't mind, Commander,"

one of the warlocks who had been fighting earlier offered.

"Go on."

"Well, the Keeper was here earlier, and when she spotted that spire, her eyes kind of lit up. Turned out she *couldn't* just use her water hand and a pick to send the entire central platform tumbling down, though, since the enemy imps fortified the slopes. She looked pretty frustrated when she found out that the lava stopped her from getting at it from below, too."

"Yes, I'm glad she's sensible and doesn't take it out on us valuable minions," the other mage interjected quickly.

"Okay, so there's a point to it," Cathy said as she walked over to the command chair. "Which leaves us with the pleasure of having to assault the dungeon heart over the narrow bridges with no railings, and with enemy vampires owning the airspace - count those for me, will you-"

"We have so far identified nine different vampires working for that Keeper," the evil wizard reported.

"- and an entire colony worth of giant spiders hangs from the ceiling. Joy." Cathy finished.

"Those are only the obvious dangers," Jered said. "Don't forget the traps. The dungeon heart's platform isn't flat, but a dome, and it looks excessively slippery. Nero has also installed hidden blades and who-knows-what else in the ground. Oh, and we shouldn't forget about his reaper, either."

Cathy sighed. "Okay, so he's a paranoid bastard. We better start working on- hey, is the dungeon heart supposed to glow that colour?"

"Nero..."

The novice Keeper flinched at the happy tone of voice his master was using. It usually was a harbinger of bad news. His swarm-body

levitated down from his first dungeon heart and bowed to the red-eyed spider that had wandered in through the portal.

"I really like what you have done with your other dungeon. Who knows, I might still be able to make good use of you after this is over!"

"I certainly hope so, Mistress," he said, meaning it. The alternative implied him being dead.

"I'm sure you do. Go ahead and cast the spell," Arachne ordered, all cheerfulness gone from her voice.

Bad news indeed. "Now?"

"No time like the present."

"But I am broke right now! Can't you donate some-"

"*Do it!*"

"Yes, mistress." With hanging shoulders, the unfortunate minion summoned the gold-plated tome. It floated in the air in front of the humanoid insect swarm and let out a soft hum as the Nero spread his arms and turned a sizeable amount of gold into raw power. Its pages seemed to vibrate with eagerness as the warlock slowly intoned the words, feeling as if he was proclaiming his own death sentence. With each syllable, the magic built up further and reached out toward his remote dungeon.

Far away, the slow and steady heartbeat of his second dungeon heart stopped for an instant, its glow neither waxing nor waning its colour changed from white to red. The moment of stillness passed, and a pulse of power rushed outward from the crystal orb, invisible except for the dust it disturbed and the cobwebs it rustled in passing. The artefact's heartbeat resumed, quicker and more excited than before.

Ami floated in front of her gem-making apparatus and reached out to tighten another screw. Her arm froze in mid motion when a near-

imperceptible shudder went through the machinery. *What is going on?* she wondered as the vibrating parts clinked against each other. A strange sensation, not unlike frozen claws drawing lines on her skin, washed over her. She let go of her screwdriver and was rather surprised when it clattered to the floor instead of vanishing into Keeper storage. Seriously worried now, she summoned her Mercury computer and vanished in a flash of blue.

"Mercury! W-what is this awful feeling?" Jered asked as soon as he spotted her step out of a swirl of snowflakes.

"I don't know! It feels like some sort of pressure is weighing on the entire dungeon." Ami was looking around with her visor in full scanning mode. "Did you notice anything unusual?"

"Well, Nero's dungeon heart started pulsing in red just before the feeling hit," Cathy said, her arms wrapped tightly around herself as if she was cold.

Ami spared the relevant scrying window a glance before focusing on the task of tracking down the disturbance again. "Hmm, it's coming from - my dungeon heart? Some kind of spell." Ami's eyes widened in shocked surprise as she adjusted some parameters and looked back and forth between the screen and her palmtop's display. "This is insane! Nero has somehow linked his dungeon heart to my own! Why would he-" she said mostly to herself while her fingers clattered over the keyboard of her Mercury computer at a breakneck pace. "They are fighting each other!" she concluded.

"That doesn't sound good," Cathy volunteered. "What can we do to make sure yours wins?"

"I'm looking into it," Ami blurted out. "There's more to the spell. Why are all of you feeling the effects too? If it target's the heart, I should be the only one affected." The teal-haired girl bit her lower lip and paled when the preliminary analysis flitted over her screen. "Oh! Both hearts are drawing strength from each underling linked to them."

"Is it going to drain us dry?" Jered's worried voice asked into the sudden silence that was only disturbed by Ami's furious typing.

"No," Ami answered, sounding relieved. "It's using everyone as a shield to block the attacks targeted at it. Since none of us are dungeon hearts it shouldn't be harmful, so why..." She frowned. "Oh, darn it! It's much worse than I thought! The magic is locking me out from my transportation powers, and it's amplifying in intensity with each reflection!"

"What's going to happen?"

Ami leaned deeper over her computer, giving her work her full attention. A clock counting from six minutes downwards appeared near the edge of the screen. With a defeated sigh, she let herself sink back into her chair. "It- it's going to continue building up until it can yank everyone connected to either dungeon heart over to Nero's fortress for a decisive battle! Whichever heart runs out of troops first will shatter!"

"WHAT? But it's full of traps and spiders over there!" Cathy screeched, instinctively grabbing her sword. The warlocks in the room didn't look too enthused either. "Can't you stop it?"

Ami shook her head, her throat feeling very dry all of a sudden. "Not in the short amount of time left."

"Can we evacuate? No, wait, if we do, your dungeon heart breaks and we are screwed anyway!" the blonde swordswoman said. "We'll have to fight!"

"I'm so sorry." Ami looked at the ground the corners of her eyes glittering wetly.

"Pull yourself together," Jadeite said, uncrossing his arms as he approached from his corner. "If Nero wants us over there, he's going to get more than he bargained for! I'm a general of the dark kingdom, and no lowly spiders are going to make lunch out of me! We will simply have to smash that uppity dungeon heart when we get there!"

"You are right." Ami ruthlessly brushed aside the encroaching despair. This wasn't the time for her to freeze up and feel sorry for herself. With three long strides, she was at the door leading out of

the command centre and pushed it open hard enough that both wooden wings clattered against the walls outside. "Follow me! There's no time to lose!" *"Everyone to my throne room, and I mean everyone! Drop whatever you are doing and come here if you want to live! Carry those who can't move on their own, if necessary! Gear up for battle and bring any combat equipment you can use!*"

Tiger's long and muscular legs carried Ami at a brisk pace through the corridors, but her racing thoughts were far ahead of her. A moment later, Cathy jogged up alongside her.

The swordswoman had to dodge a door that suddenly flew open, revealing a warlock who had his staff wedged underneath his elbow and had his robe the wrong way on. He quickly hobbled after them. Unperturbed, she asked "What's your plan?"

"Prepare everyone for the battle as well as possible. You and Jered, bring the other minions up to speed. I'll cast the fire-protection spell on everyone. Everyone needs to know what to expect and how to react as soon as we arrive." The door of the throne room came into view. "Let's get ready!"

"...and if you manage to set yourself on fire somehow, give the nearest spider a hug," a warlock advised as he distributed magic wands to the scythe-wielding goblins, whose automatons would most certainly not be available in the coming battle.

Ami pulled her attention from the scene and let her gaze wander over the nervous troops, her forehead covered with cold sweat. All was said and done, and now she just had to wait for the inevitable. Nurgil, in the form of a large, amulet-wearing bat, circled over her head. Multi-coloured lights flashed as the warlocks cast protective spells on themselves and waved their staves. One of the armoured dark elves stopped checking her crossbow and put a reassuring hand on the shoulders of a smaller, portlier figure in plate armour, who was shaking in fear. Snyder, his pallor hidden behind his helmet, had not taken the news well. Ami hoped that his bag of wards would keep him safe. The trolls, only some of whom had opted to make armour for themselves, were the only ones who

seemed largely unaffected by the atmosphere of nervousness.

Ami's lips clenched into a thin line as the countdown inexorably approached zero. "Everyone, get ready! It is time. Three. Two. One. NOW!"

The pressure weighting down on her seemed to intensify a hundredfold, and space twisted. For an instant, she saw her reflection in the curved crystal of a dungeon heart as it spat her out and sent her hurtling through the air. The world spinning around her was filled with flailing limbs and flying bodies while the enemy dungeon heart continued spewing out friend and foe in all directions. Ami instinctively teleported higher up before hitting the sloping ground, letting the fat green spider behind her smack into the yellow tiles instead. Her heart skipped a beat at the chaotic mess she saw from the air. There was no hope of establishing clean, separate formations or protective perimeters with the way the warriors were arriving. From the huge crystal orb occupying the highest point of the rock spire, an expanding circle of troops rolled and skidded down the slopes and toward the edge of the platform. Fighting both gravity and the enemies they were tangled with, the soldiers had little hope of slowing their descent.

"Jadeite! Do it!" Ami called as she zoomed toward the edge of the hundreds of meters deep abyss, ready to catch as many of her warriors as she could. To her relief, the dark general must have heard her over the cacophony of pained yells and angry chirps, since the hill's slippery surface turned into a thick, sticky swamp that killed the avalanche's forward momentum. *Phew. That's one trap reversed. Now where is everyone?*

"Shabon Spray!" Thick mist rose from behind the dungeon heart, giving Ami a good hint as to where Cathy had landed. By now, the young Keeper had spotted the hundreds of white strings shooting toward the ceiling from the melee. Spiders, some covered in mud, others with red-painted mandibles, pulled themselves up toward the curtain of cobwebs above. *Makes sense that Nero has a way to escape his own trap.* Her anger grew when she saw a warlock struggle briefly in the grasp of one of the ascending beasts and then go still.

The spiders weren't the only ones rising above the battle, which was starting in earnest now that the combatants had pulled themselves to their feet. Nine black-coated figures standing on tiny clouds circled the airspace like vultures, occasionally casting spells at their enemies below. The sight of three dozen giant flies making it into the air to escape from their mortal enemies was much more heartening to Ami, as were Mareki and Jadeite appearing above the crowd. She felt like cheering when the green-tressed youma unhinged her jaw and swept the torrent of water shooting from her mouth around in a full circle, cutting through the silk lines that the spiders were hanging from.

Ami's earlier outcry hadn't just drawn a reaction from Jadeite, though. One of the enemy vampires was blurring towards her, and she dove out of his path with an undignified squeal when her Keeper hand failed to manifest. *Right, my transportation powers are still knocked out!* A quick Shabon Spray Freezing to the face punished the returning bloodsucker for his all-too-predictable attack vector, sending his ice-encased body tumbling into the lava-filled abyss below. Naturally, the monster simply teleported out of his confinement during the fall, and Ami muttered a curse as she lost track of him.

"Crap! Move it, Jered!" Cathy shouted as she threw herself aside, narrowly dodging a vampire who was swooping down on her like a bird of prey. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her boyfriend land on a spider and ram a dagger into its body before it could get out from underneath his armoured bulk.

The spiders with their spindly legs had much more trouble with the swamp than their outnumbered opponents, which gave the latter a fighting chance. Nevertheless, the things remained too dangerous for Cathy's tastes. The swordswoman ducked under the snapping mandibles of the arachnid that had tried to jump on her back and rammed her sword through its thorax up to its hilt. As she hurried to kick the corpse off of her ichor-splattered weapon, she searched for the vampire. Over there, floating and glowering down at her and the scythe-wielding goblins doing their best to establish a perimeter around her and keep the spiders at bay. Two of the small green

forms were already down, looking like deflated puppets from the poison dissolving their organs. The blonde shuddered.

"This mist is annoying," the pale undead declared, baring his fangs. "Begone!" He thrust both hands forward, releasing a gale of wind that hit everything in a cone in front of him.

Cathy felt as if she had been punched in the gut, and her feet lost contact with the ground. Her blue eyes widened in terror when the force of the wind carried her and the surrounding creatures over the edge of the platform in a ballistic trajectory. She screamed. Around her, the falling spiders threw silken lifelines and arrested their fall, leaving her and the goblins to plummet to their doom alone.

Suddenly, the air flashed blue, and a small hand closed around hers. The resulting jerk almost dislocated her left arm. "Mercury! I have never been so glad to see you."

Four giant flies buzzed past, grabbing a falling goblin each. "You are welcome." Ami nodded with a bitter smile when the remaining two goblins splashed into the lava below and she felt their deaths resonate through her Keeper link.

Snowflakes enveloped Cathy, and she was suddenly in a quieter zone of the battlefield, staring at the backs of three warlocks. The monstrous spiders trying to batter down the transparent forcefield that the magicians were maintaining felt much to close for comfort. Streamers of fire launched into the air, incinerating many of the spider webs that the mass of arachnids on the ceiling was raining down on the battle. Three of the protected wizards linked their hands and finished a chant, and a large fireball shot upwards. It slammed into the ceiling like an exploding comet and caused stone and charred spider bits to rain drop down the battlefield. "Why don't you have Jadeite turn the ground into oil, instead of this muck, and set it on fire? We are fireproof, they aren't."

"We'd asphyxiate," Ami said simply before she renewed the mist that offered cover for her troops.

"Okay." Cathy jumped high to stab an abseiling spider into the belly, and looked around. "Where's Marda? Aren't the trolls supposed to

keep the vampires off our backs?"

Wincing, Ami pointed to a typhoon of carnage that raged in a different section of the battle and sent blood and goblin parts flying through the air. "Reaper defence."

In a lane filled with mutilated corpses, Marda and the reaper were locked in a deadly dance that neither opponent knew how to end quickly. Like her opponent, the female troll avoided sinking into the mud and maintained her mobility by hopping from corpse to corpse as she traded blows with her enemy. The surrounding goblins made the battle all the more frustrating for hers. Trapped between the reaper and too many spiders to count, the little creatures were firing their wands until they were empty. Sometimes, they even managed to zap a spider, but since they rightfully considered the reaper a greater threat, Marda had to swerve and weave between the multi-coloured beams of friendly fire. The reaper treated their attacks more like a game, interpreting any potshots at him as a "please kill me" sign. To Marda's great annoyance, the demon wasn't giving her his full attention, despite her constant interference. She was a difficult target, and the goblins were easy, so the murderous beast took any opportunity to gain some distance and crush, mutilate, or behead the short green warriors.

She blocked a furious scythe blow, making sure to parry the haft of the weapon, rather than the blade. The strength of the blow forced her to hop back into the cover of the Keeper's fog, which allowed the blood-soaked fiend to cut another goblin in half at the waist. Her fury grew with each kill. The troll felt little compassion for the green-skinned vermin, but each soldier struck down this way was a failure to do her duty, to stop the demonic killing machine. Marda hated nothing more than failure, and each hacked-apart goblin added to her rage. With a growl, she swung her blurring warhammer into the belly of an attacking spider, flipping it over. A short hop, and she was surfing the struggling body down the slope to have yet another go at her demonic enemy.

A twister of insects swirled around a glowing crystal ball sitting on a low pedestal. The swarms constant buzzing modulated itself into an excited voice as Arachne spoke. "It is time, my dear Alphel. My minion has just put the final phase of my plan into action. Mercury's end is near!"

"Remember, I will be the one to kill Mercury," the red-eyed darkness in the scrying orb rumbled in a gravelly voice.

"Yes, of course," Arachne granted. "I don't care who gets rid of her, as long as she's punished for her impertinence and out of my hair. Ah, how much do you think Morrigan will be kicking himself for not listening to my plan when he had the chance?"

"Who cares about that fool?" Alphel feigned disinterest. "Lord Azzathra will be waiting to snatch up the blue-haired worm when she passes through his realm. He will be rather cross with me if I wasted his time. You had better hope that does not happen, because if it does, I will take it out on you tenfold!"

"Oh, I'm shaking in my boots. Or I would be, if I had any. Or if I thought that there was any way that Mercury could wiggle out of this one," the cloud of insects mocked, contracting and expanding rapidly as it laughed.

"So you say. Let's get on with it, then!"

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Nero's Spell (Part 2)

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"This doesn't look good! It's as if there's no end to the spiders," Cathy shouted as she cut through a stabbing foreleg, then finished her attacker with a cut between the eyes.

"Actually, we seem to be winning," Mercury, who had better battlefield awareness from her Keeper sight, contradicted and fired one of her freezing spells at a passing vampire. "We are getting closer and closer to the enemy dungeon heart. Look!"

Mareki hovered over the battle like a grey humanoid lizard and swept the stream of water from her gaping mouth in wide arcs over the lines of arachnids. The powerful burst pushed them back with smashed limbs and carapaces, securing the left flank of the forces that were slowly advancing on the enemy dungeon heart. On the right side, a semi-spherical patch of utter darkness served as obstacle to the enemy hordes. Ami didn't know exactly what Umbra was doing to those spiders that dared enter, but so far, none had left the one-armed youma's dome. With both flanks unassailable, the goblins, trolls, and warlocks were able to put pressure on the front that even the numerical superiority of the enemy couldn't hold back.

Ami was about to engage a vampire in an aerial battle when a jolt went through her mind. She turned very, very pale, and her crimson-glowing eyes widened in terror. *What? The alarm wards? Now?* "Intruders have breached my dungeon! Cathy, I have to leave!"

With her Keeper transport remaining suppressed by the enemy dungeon heart, she was glad she had the Dark Kingdom style teleport as alternative, or she would have been stuck here. Accompanied by a maelstrom of snowflakes, she sent herself to her workshop. Immediately, she felt Nero's magic tug and pull at her body, and realised that she would be yanked back in an instant. "Sorry, Tiger." Ami ended the possession, staying behind as the tiger-striped youma disappeared back to the battle. She hoped the

mentally damaged creature would be fine on her own. Fortunately, the magic didn't try to seize her real body, too, since she didn't count as an underling. Unfortunately, with both the youma's magical reserves and the Keeper transport unavailable, she was down to Shabon Spray, Keeper spells, personal magic, and skill at arms to beat back the invasion. All on her own. *I can't lose here when everyone else is out there fighting for me!* At least she still had her Keeper sight to spy on the enemies within her dungeon, see what they were up to, and formulate a response.

"All right, Alphel dear," the red-eyed imp standing on Mercury's opulent throne said when a scarred dark mistress rose like a blob of black tar from the pooling shadows. "I'm ready." As it spoke, it emptied its squirming backpack onto the floor, disgorging around a score of toads. "Do your thing."

"You would do well to be more respectful, Arachne." The dark mistress, whose eyes were burning just as crimson as those of the imp, snapped her fingers. Three of her own imps teleported in within swirls of greenish motes, somersaulting as they dropped to the ground. They too emptied bags full of amphibians onto the floor. A wheel-shaped symbol appeared in the leather-dressed woman's eyes, rotating slowly. Where her stare met the floor, a matching many-spoked magic circle appeared, and the animals within abruptly changed shape as the transformation magic on them was broken. Out of Arachne's toads grew different kinds of giant spiders and a handful of warlocks, while Alphel had brought orcs and bile demons.

Far away in the workshop, Ami's knuckles whitened around the haft of the two-handed sword she had picked from one of the smithies. *TWO* Keepers after her, cooperating?

"So this is Mercury's throne room," Alphel said as she turned once around her own axis, taking in the glittering architecture. "I already hate it. Smash. Everything!"

The horde of orcs was only too eager to obey the command, and Ami's opulent throne was the first to casualty. Spiked warhammers ripped great chunks out of the stone furniture, reducing it to a pile of

unrecognisable rubble and dust and chasing Arachne's imp body away.

"Mind if I join in?" she asked, unperturbed.

Alphel gave a mock bow. "Be my guest."

One of the spiders, a matte-black arachnid with short legs and a stocky build, increased to mammoth size. The Arachne-imp cackled and raised its stubby arms. "Dance for me! Yes, that's right!"

The titanic spider started slamming its legs into the ground to a clumsy rhythm, shattering the mirrored floor under its weight and bringing down some of the pillars from the quakes. The warlocks and other spiders scrambled to get out of its path while dodging the flying debris.

"Adequate," Alphel grumbled, never one to admit having been outdone. "My scrying indicates that the door behind the throne is the only way to her dungeon heart."

"Ah?" Arachne whistled, drawing the attention of the super-spider. "You heard the evil fellow. That way!" The imp pointed at the wall, and the monster charged it like a battering ram. To the Keeper's satisfaction, cracks started spreading from the impact zone. "Again! Haha! Again!"

"Don't be an idiot. I have no interest in dealing with her traps. Since you were kind enough to get all her minions out of our way, we shall simply dig our own entrance," Alphel declared as she strutted toward the back wall. Prompted by an unseen warning, her head whipped around, catching a brilliant mote of light in her gaze. The wheel-symbols in her eyes flared, snuffing out the budding firestorm spell. "Aw, did you notice us, Mercury?" the Keeper called into the room, causing the troops to tense up. "Your efforts are futile. Lord Azzathra protects me from your weak magic, and is eagerly awaiting your imminent arrival!"

This isn't good, Ami thought, her muscles twitching from the power feedback caused by the stillborn magic. If the enemy could zero in and on her Keeper spells and deny them before they formed, then

they were almost useless. Could she blind the enemy Keeper somehow? Shabon Spray was the obvious option, but without her transport power, she couldn't use it remotely. Could she risk getting closer? She watched the possessed dark mistress put her hand on the wall, causing its magical fortifications to crumble. An eager imp scuttled forward and drove its pick into the ice. As soon as the digging implement burrowed itself into the surface, the imp started twitching and shaking. Accompanied by a sizzling noise, it dissolved into a cloud of fading green motes and left nothing but a burnt smell behind.

"...the hell?" Alphel cocked her head, narrowing her eyes at the tiny puncture in the wall that gleamed metallic at its deepest point.

"What, Azzathra's ability to shut down magic failed you already?" Arachne mocked, and had to duck under a thrown shard. "Tetchy."

"Fine, do it your way, then," Alphel ordered when another imp died from an electric shock as soon as it struck the wall, despite her glaring at the wall with her anti-magic gaze on full power.

"I know you'd see reason. Minions, make room for the spider! Spider, break down that wall!"

Ami felt the dungeon vibrate when the massive bulk of the enlarged spider slammed into the wall. Huge chunks of ice skidded down the corridor behind it as the arachnid broke through the obstacle in a shower of clinking shards and sparking electric cables. It thrashed around with its hairy forelimbs and let out a piercing wail as it struggled to free itself from the tight breach. Arachne solved the problem by shrinking the animal back to its regular size. Not out of sympathy for the creature, who wobbled tiredly back to the safety of the ruined throne room, but because it had blocked the way. From the breach crept the dense dry-ice based fog that Ami used to protect the secrets of the forbidden part of her dungeon.

"Shabon Spray!"

The shout came from behind, just outside the throne room. Arachne spotted a faint blue flash through the ice wall, bereft of its stone cladding. Through the open door, more fog drifted into the vast

chamber.

"Oh, she's here! That's perfect!" Alphel laughed as her gaze burned clear cones into the encroaching mist. "Are you thinking what I am thinking?"

Arachne just grinned and gave a hand signal to the five warlocks she had brought. The magicians nodded and faded from view, sparing the world the sight of their garish red robes with embroidered black spiders. "Find her. Kill her if you can," she told her invisible troops. "Spiders! More webs! Make sure she gets stuck if she dares follow us!" Under her watchful gaze, the arachnids started spinning their webs and draping them over the walls. She barely noticed the faint depressions that the footsteps of her cloaked wizards left on the debris-strewn floor as she returned her attention to the laid-open corridor. "Right. Traps. I have just the spell for this! Come, my pretties, and seek out what would harm us!" She let a gust of mana follow her words, and a carpet of vermin sprang from her fingers.

"Work fast. I'm going hunting!" Alphel said, her borrowed face distorting into a wide grin.

"Shabon Spray!" Ami pressed her back against the wall as she peeked around the corner with her visor. Alphel's ability being strong enough to dispel the fog had been an ugly surprise, but it seemed to be line of sight only. Thus, if she stayed away from the enemy Keeper, she could at least pick off the minions sent out to hunt her. The less could make it to her dungeon heart, the better. She was a bit nervous about her traps being able to stop this intrusion on their own, but first, she would deal with the problems she *could* handle. While her Keeper sight didn't pick up the invisible mages, her visor did so without problems. The one she had just targeted peered nervously into the fog, turning at random intervals. He never noticed her when she floated soundlessly along the ceiling, reached down, and ripped out his life energy through his scalp. Three down, two more to go. Ami leaned her sword against the wall and consulted her computer. The remaining two were close to each other and checking the living quarters, using a - visible - imp to open the doors

for them. Whenever they had verified that she wasn't in there, they launched a fireball into the bedroom and torched the belongings of the inhabitants before proceeding to the next room. Ami grimaced at the wanton destruction and waited for the right moment. All right, one had just entered another chamber. With a flash of blue, she appeared behind his partner in crime. A quick grab to the neck with a hand shrouded in black, and he collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut.

"Got you."

Ami's hackles rose when she heard the tiny and entirely unexpected voice behind her, and she teleported out immediately. To her shock, the magic she gathered around herself dissipated instantly, and she remained solidly where she was. Whirling around in sudden dread, she spotted the imp she hadn't considered a serious danger. Its huge eyes were glowing red, and the wheel-like symbol within gleamed with sinister yellow light.

"Don't run away now, little girl. My minions will be here soon enough to put you out of your misery!"

In a split-second, Ami evaluated her options. Darting into one of the burning rooms was out, since Alphel's anti-magic gaze must have shut down her fire immunity. Running down the corridor was an option, but she didn't want to turn her back to the miniature enemy. Imp or not, it was possessed by a spell-casting Keeper. That left eliminating the source of the danger. Almost as soon as the thought was finished, Ami was already moving, lunging with her two-handed sword at the miniature enemy - who disappeared in a swirl of green motes and reappeared at the other end of the long, straight corridor, grinning at her evilly. Foiled, she made a break for the closest open door and smacked face-first into the invisible warlock. Quick-witted, the evil mage slammed the door shut in her face while she bounced back. Slightly dazed by the impact, Ami remained aware enough to hear the bar behind the obstacle slide shut. "Darn it!" Very well. She only had to be out of the other Keeper's sight long enough to teleport. As fast as she could, she sprinted toward the corner at the opposite end of the corridor, where her shadow was moving in a many-spoked magical circle. *It even generates its own light! That kills my other plan!* Ami looked back over her shoulder to see if

Alphel wasn't casting anything. If she was lucky, he would have to shut his suppressive stare down to use magic. The sheltering corner was close now. Only two more bounds. Ami's eyes widened, and only her senshi reflexes saved her from the eviscerating claws strapped to the wrists of the leather-clad, scarred woman who had been waiting for her there. The muscles in Ami's legs protested as she thrust as hard as she could, pushing her entire weight backward and away from the scissoring arc the gleaming blades scraped to the air. Three shallow lines just below her left ribs burned on her skin, and a few white scraps of cloth from her fuku fluttered through the air.

"Die!" the dark mistress shouted and thrust her right hand forward, then blinked when the bolts of lightning jumping from her fingers died before it could reach its target.

Thanks, Alphel Ami thought sarcastically as she took advantage of the woman's momentary confusion, grabbed the extended wrist behind the claws, and yanked her close. A quick knee to the stomach and a follow-up strike with the pommel of the sword to the woman's chin sent her reeling to the floor, moaning in ecstasy. Even without Keeper senses, Ami could already hear the trampling footsteps of an entire horde of orcs closing in rapidly on her position. She darted past the corner, out of the imp's line of sight, teleported, and felt like screaming in frustration when she remained where she was. Behind her, the prone mistress was staring at her with red-glowing eyes. Ami lashed out with her sword, but the weapon came to a screeching stop between the raised claws of the possessed enemy.

"Give it up, Mercury. None can escape me."

Hearing the orcs approach, Ami turned tail and ran. She knew there was a spiral staircase not far away, where she should be able to dive out of sight long enough to get to safety. By now, she was wishing that she hadn't designed most hallways long and straight for security purposes. With her heart pounding, she checked on the position of the orcs, only to find that they were splitting into squads and methodically entering all of her possible escape routes. They'd block her path at the nearest intersection. Ami almost stumbled from dividing her attention between running and watching a different

region of the dungeon at the same time. *Alphel can't be protecting them as long as she's staring at me!* she realised. Casting a spell while dashing was difficult, but she somehow managed without swallowing her tongue. A rumbling burst of flame shot from the side tunnel to the right, thundering across her path like a speeding train. The explosion raced onwards into the left tunnel, from which Ami briefly heard appalled screams. The fires didn't die down quickly enough and blocked the corridor, but Ami just increased her pace. She covered her face with both arms as she jumped straight through the wall of searing flame, over a charred corpse, and teleported. She failed once again, and dropped into a roll on the other side. A few hurried pats put out her singed skirt as she got back to her feet. Six pink-skinned orcs were charging at her, one with wheel-marked burning eyes. With reflexes ingrained from Cathy's painful training sessions, Ami made her sword flash up and met a descending war hammer with much more force than could be reasonably expected from the slight girl. She saw the creature's beady eyes widen in disbelief as she batted its weapon aside, one-handed no less, and stabbed it in the stomach. With the wounded orc tumbling back and stumbling into its allies, Ami had a moment to assess her situation. She *needed* to get out of Alphel's sight, but he was protected by his orcs and ready to switch bodies as soon as she made a break for it, with imps positioned in many strategic locations by now. So she did the last thing he expected. With a loud battle-cry, the slight girl lunged forward, sword raised high.

The dumbfounded orcs grinned in anticipation. Their faces fell when lightning-quick strikes rained down on them with enough force to send them reeling. They were well-trained, but they were neither reaper nor at least senshi-level combatants. Individually, they wouldn't even be a match for one of Marda's trolls, Ami realized as her blade drew gleaming arcs through the air, parrying strikes left and right with loud clangs. Against this kind of opponent, the physical superiority provided by her senshi enhancements was enough to make up for her relative lack of skill. *Maybe she needs to touch targets to disable enchantments?* Ami wondered, remembering how Alphel had torn down the fortification on a spot of wall. An orc was not fast enough to protect his throat from her blade's darting tip, and he slumped to the ground with a ghastly gurgle. Ami gasped in pain when one of the many whirling clubs

slipped through her defence and scored a glancing hit against her right shoulder blade, but the adrenaline pumping through her veins kept her from fully registering the injury. She rolled with the blow and kicked away an attacker sneaking up on her from behind, warned by her Keeper sight. A vicious hack to the right, and another troll went down, missing his lower leg. That left her enough room to manoeuvre closer to Alphel and enact her plan.

The possessed orc grinned at Mercury's approach, and why shouldn't he? This wasn't Alphel's own body, so there was no risk to herself. She had the panting, blood-covered girl right where she wanted, and reinforcements were arriving. Azzathra would reward her greatly for personally destroying this thorn in his side!

Ami rammed her elbow into the solar plexus of the orc to her left, squinting through the blood that was dripping into her eyes from a cut just below her tiara, and lunged at Alphel. The enemy Keeper easily caught the overhead blow on her spiked hammer, disregarding her borrowed body's safety limits. Ami wasn't discouraged, though. All she cared about was getting close enough that those terrible eyes could not keep track of *all* of her body. She bent forward so that her left palm was at about the same height as Alphel's knees. Ami's plan was simple: surprise Alphel by making her slip and get behind her before she could turn or jump bodies. The execution was tricky, however. She didn't have the magical reserves to cast her freezing spell under her own power. If she tried, she would drop to her knees from exhaustion and be an easy target for the orcs. Her dungeon heart, however, was only too happy to use gold to provide an alternative power source. "Shabon Spray Freezing!"

The improvisation worked better than Ami had expected, and Alphel was suitably surprised when the black shards of the corrupted spell tore her feet off and made her topple forward like timber. Somewhat cheekily, Ami slammed her hands onto the head of the falling orc and leapfrogged over him, clearing his field of vision. In a flash of blue, she was gone.

"Arachne! Why haven't you gotten to the dungeon heart yet?" Alphel

fumed as she strutted into the room in her favourite dark mistress' scarred body, followed by white-haired orcs, who slumped their shoulders like whipped puppies. The sight of the corridor leading deeper into Mercury's inner sanctum told her enough. It was covered in scorch marks, scrapes, and uncountable finger-long spiders. An impaled spider hung from a ballista bolt in the ceiling, and in places, the passage looked as if it had collapsed in on itself, requiring imp labour to clear it.

The other Keeper, still possessing an imp, was down to two measly spiders and actually looked embarrassed. "I am making progress, but I'm afraid these traps are devious. Many of them don't seem to be fuelled by magic and just kill their victims with invisible lightning. Others have a delayed reaction, or wait for the second person to trigger. But don't despair, my little beauties are hard at work discovering and disarming all of these nasty surprises for us."

A flash of blue came from the door, accompanied by the challenging voice of a young girl. "Alphel! Face me again if you dare!"

Mercury! Quick like a snake, Alphel focused her glare on the slip of a girl that stood in the open door of her shattered throne room, striking an incredibly silly-looking pose. What was the stupid brat thinking, doing something suicidal like that? She wasn't even taking a ready stance! As if felled by the eager Keeper's death glare, the blue-haired teenager slowly fell over, her arms still fixed in their initial positions. The mannequin's blue wig came lose as it struck the ground. "What the-" Alphel whirled around, realising that she had been had. At the same time, the minions started howling in pain. An evil black fog was pouring into the ruined room through the cracks in the ground, with devastating effect on the living creatures trapped within. It dispersed as soon as she looked at it, but the damage was done.

"Lady Alphel, I can't see," one of the orcs complained before stumbling into another. All around, similar complaints echoed through the chamber.

"Well, this sucks," the red-eyed swarm of insects that had squeezed out of a writhing imp's body commented with a thousand voices. "I can't work with all my minions blind and deaf. I'm out of here!"

"Arachne! Don't you dare!" Alphel raged, but the insect cloud had already turned into black lightning and darted away through the ceiling. "MERCURY! Do you think you have won? Do you really think you can get away with humiliating me like that? More powerful Keepers than you have tried, and none remain among the living!" The dark mistress fell quiet, not because she wanted to, but because her lung capacity was exhausted. She took a deep breath and continued, slightly calmer. "Who needs Arachne, anyway? I will show you why brute force and power triumph over sneakiness and trickery! You will now have the undeserved honour of being eradicated by the greatest of my minions, Azzathra's most favoured servant!"

Huddled against the dungeon heart and taking some comfort from its calm beat, Ami felt like banging her head against one of the four pillars surrounding the artefact. Would she have to deal with yet another reaper now? Nervously, she watched an imp appear next to Alphel and pull a chicken from its backpack. Black lightning shot from the dark mistress into the bird as the Keeper switched bodies. The scarred women, back in control of her own body, took one look at the transforming monstrosity and dashed for the closest shadow, diving into it as if it was a pool. The chicken was growing quickly. Its beak elongated into a long, toothy snout, and its wings took on a bat-like appearance even as it sprouted another set of legs.

A dragon, Ami realised. A huge dragon! Fascinated, she watched the head on top of the serpentine neck duck when its horns scraped against the ceiling. Azzathra's Favoured kept growing, long past what Ami would have considered possible. It was hard to believe that a creature that big could exist. The dragon had to crouch and tuck in its tail to even fit its enormous bulk into her vast throne room. Ami thought it wouldn't be very combat-effective confined like that, but unfortunately, she had no idea how to kill something that big, even if she could avoid Alphel's dread gaze.

"Now, you shall realise the futility of standing against me!" the creature roared, shaking the iceberg with its voice.

Hundreds of fist-sized balls appeared in the air around its body and dropped to the floor, reminding Ami of fairy glitter. They were all mirrored spheres, she realised, and Alphel would be able to see any

part of his surroundings reflected in at least some of them. Was that enough to suppress magic? Sacrificing a gold coin, Ami cast a light spell underneath the dragon's tail, only to have it snuffed out without the beast even noticing. No sneaky teleports into blind, vulnerable spots for her, then. Not that her computer had detected any yet. At least, the monster was still stuck in the throne room.

"You like knowledge, don't you?" Alphel growled. "You are in luck, then. I will teach you why you shouldn't have built your dungeon out of ice! It will be the last lesson you ever learn!"

The dragon whipped its tail against the wall, and Ami could feel its magical reinforcements shatter where it was hit. If she had been observing the scene through her own eyes, she would have had to avert her eyes from the glare when the room lit up like the sun. Its icy surfaces mirroring and reflecting the light of the bright white flames streaming from the dragon's maw, dimmed only by the steam rising from the boiling puddle where the wall had been.

Alphel wasn't satisfied with merely melting a tunnel to Mercury's dungeon heart. She would not crawl through a confined passage, but walk proudly with her head held high! Bursts of flame shot into every direction, devastating the surrounding dungeon and causing boiling water to pool around her feet. She didn't mind. Neither did she mind the huge chunks of ice that bounced off her emerald scales when the ceiling collapsed, pelting her with masonry and broken furniture. The few, miserable minions who hadn't been trampled or fried yet were not so lucky.

Ami winced as yet another dry ice container exploded, overheated by the stream of fire vomited forth by the behemoth. The dragon was making a complete mess of her dungeon while it inexorably advanced toward its destination. The blue-haired teenager realised that she was shaking in fright. At the foot of the dungeon heart's dais, gold coins appeared while she sold off rooms in the path of the monster before they could be destroyed. For once, she had no good plan. The ballista bolts and cannonballs were just bouncing off the creature's skin, magic was out, and Alphel was smart enough to not undermine anything sufficiently heavy to inconvenience her. Even the sparking cables draped across her snout and front legs did nothing to slow her down. She simply melted her way through the

ice as if she was wielding a blowtorch. Ten more metres until she would arrive in the vast heart chamber, forcing a confrontation. Ami renewed her fire protection and stood her ground in front of the dungeon heart, glaring in defiance at the cracks forming in the orange-glowing ice. All too soon, the wall crumbled, and the horned, red-glowing head of the creature poked into the room. Ami's heart almost stopped when she got her first look at it in person. That maw looked big enough to swallow an elephant without chewing! *Fire!* she thought, directing the array of traps covering the walls to aim at the crimson slits in the gigantic lizard face.The purely magical devices misfired, cancelled-out by Alphel's gaze, but there were enough mechanical ones to fill the air with the whistling of ballista bolts and cannonballs. Ami yanked on a lever, and the floor dropped out underneath her as the dungeon heart sank into a cylindrical pit, breaking its connection to the rest of the dungeon. A metal disk slid into place above her, sealing the entrance. The lid, at least, was still connected to the dungeon heart and counted as Ami's territory, allowing her to observe the effects of her last desperate ploy.

When the explosions and thwacking impacts subsided, the dragon's sooty face looked as if it was covered in stubble from all the bolts and harpoons sticking out of its skin. Eyelids like safe doors lifted, revealing that the monster's crimson orbs remained unharmed. Alphel cocked her head when the bombardment stopped and threw a bemused glance at the metal disk where the dungeon heart used to be. She dragged the rest of her body into the room through the crumbling wall and blew a playful gust of flame at the cover. The surrounding ice melted away, revealing a metal cylinder within the cooling pool she had just made..

"Seriously, Keeper? Tinned food?" Alphel gloated as she sat down before the covered pit, raising a giant paw like a cat ready to strike. "I shall crush you with these very claws!"

Ami was at her wisdoms end and stared up at the raised limb with terrified resignation. If only she had been rich enough to make the bunker walls thicker! Much thicker! Her thoughts flashed back to her friends. Usagi. Rei. Luna. Would they be all right without her? And would Cathy, Snyder, and Jered survive? She had failed them. She had no way to stop something this strong! She didn't want to die and

go back to Azzathra! Hot tears stung in her eyes as she beheld the huge creature that would be the end of her, bringing its clawed forelimb down to smash through the steel lid above. It would take an act of god to stop - wait!

The dragon's forelimb whistled down like a falling bus, and Ami cringed as it tore through the bending steel with an awful tearing noise. Like a spear, it kept going deeper, straight toward her and the vulnerable dungeon heart.

"LORD AZZATHRA, SAVE ME!"

The enormous creature's tortured bellow was incredibly loud and caused Ami to yelp in pain and curl up into a ball as its echoes rolled like thunder across the landscape. The dragon's had penetrated the cover and descended up to its elbow, deep enough to pierce the dungeon heart and burrow through the floor below. Ami, instead of being sucked screaming into Azzathra's clutches, was looking up at a second artificial ceiling. The intruding limb disappeared after a mere meter, vanishing into the swirling, hypnotic pool of the dark temple she had constructed in its path at the last moment.

Ami dropped to her knees in relief. "It- it worked." Shaken and bleeding from her ears, she looked outside just in time to see something black and shadowy detach itself from the enormous dragon and zoom off over the ocean, toward the west. Even to her rattled senses, it looked incomplete and sluggish. At the same time, the light in the monster's eyes died, and its reared-back head succumbed to gravity. Its enormous jaw crashed down next to the metal cylinder, cracking the ice with its weight. The resulting quake toppled Ami, but she noted that it hadn't made any sound. Frowning, she raised shaking hands to her ears and fixed her hearing. Then, she let out a relieved breath. She almost couldn't believe that she was still alive. Under her feet, the devastated iceberg kept quaking from the dragon's death throes. Now, she finally knew what happened to someone who touched the temple's pool. Her scientific mind wondered whether the part that was inside the basin was simply gone, or whether she would need to pull it out. She also should return to the battle with Nero. Then, strange crackling noises from above drew her attention, and she received the next unwelcome surprise of the day. The temple's dark violet carvings

weren't supposed to glow or rearrange themselves into the approximation of a many-horned skull! Before Ami knew what was happening, she found herself on the ground right next to the dead dragon's limb, looking at the dark blue, veined rock sculpture.

Queen Beryl shielded her eyes with one arm when the black crystal ball tipping her staff flared brightly, and she squinted into the unexpected, flame-shaped glow that wafted around it for several seconds. Her mouth opened once, then closed again. "Queen Metallia?" With no thought spared for her courtiers, she sank through the bottom of her stone throne like a ghost and hurried toward the Great Ruler's cocoon.

"Rise!" a thundering, female voice sounded in Ami's mind. Confused, she noted that her knees were still touching cold floor tiles.

"Q-queen Metallia?" She asked as she complied with the order, trying not to show her dread.

"You have proven yourself a worthy servant," the voice confirmed, and tendrils of blackness crept out of the basin to wrap around the blue-haired girl. *"Receive my dark blessing!"*

The evil energy sank through Ami's skin and into her body, startling her. It was not an unpleasant feeling, as such, and partly reminded her of her transformation sequence. Nevertheless, the sensation of something caressing her organs was creeping her out incredibly, as did her ignorance about what was going on. *Metallia took the dragon's life energy?* Her teeth chattered. Had she saved herself and thereby released the dark goddess, dooming the world?

Fortunately for Ami, Queen Metallia seemed to mistake her silence and lack of reaction for overawed reverence. *"You may now draw upon my dark power as easily as any of my generals can. Use it wisely to gather more energy so that I may fully awaken!"*

The young senshi's relief at not having accidentally freed the greatest threat to her world enabled her to throw off her paralysis. "Thank you," she said respectfully and bowed, despite feeling like screaming inside. She had enough problems with dark gods without offending another one, particularly this one.

Now, I- Metallia's voice wavered, and the next utterance of the malevolent entity was a growl of bone-chilling outrage. *"Who dares attack the Queen of Darkness?"* she hissed as her voice faded away. The temple's pool bubbled as its pillars shook, and after a few heartbeats, the violet light faded away. They had been short heartbeats, too, since Ami's heart was racing. She looked down at herself and grimaced. Still, if the whites of her uniform turning black and the bows becoming more jagged were the worst of the changes, she would count herself lucky. No time to dwell on all of this now, since she still had a battle to finish and employees to save!

It was a good thing that Nero no longer had hair, since he would have been pulling it out right now. Where did Mercury find these freaks? It just wasn't fair! His invincible reaper was being stalled by a troll, of all things, and that weird water-spewing lizard woman was bowling over his formations wherever she chose! The clump of spider corpses dragging itself forward like a macabre tortoise while firing bolts at an insane rate was less mysterious, since it was simply a tentacle monster emulating a hermit crab while cycling through six crossbows. A remarkable feat of dexterity, yes, but one that Nero wasn't inclined to admire. The damn thing kept perforating his all-important spiders.

He still had no idea what was inside the black dome that had appeared on one of the slopes and was inching towards his dungeon heart, since none of his forces that entered it ever left. Worst of all, however, was that blond, grey-uniformed arsehole floating above the battlefield and laughing maniacally. His shield seemed impervious to anything the spiders threw at him, and he kept making the arachnids fall asleep, only to turn them against their rightful master like animated puppets . That guy had to go! At least, the few surviving vampires were performing as advertised. Nero buzzed toward one in swarm form. "You! Blow that troll away from

the reaper!"

"Yes, Keeper." Mud sprayed as the vampire unleashed a gust of wind, succeeding in separating Marda from her opponent and tossing a few goblins on their backs.

"Rabixtrel," Nero shouted as he floated past the demon's horns, "leave the troll alone, kill that guy instead!" A hand made out of black insects pointed at Jadeite.

The reaper seemed to consider the words for a moment, then snorted and walked in the indicated direction. Each spider in the immediate vicinity lunged at Marda, preventing her from catching up.

"Oh, what is this? Someone dares challenge a dark general?" With an arrogant smirk, Jadeite drifted closer to the ground to make things easier for the charging reaper.

"Do not underestimate him!" Snyder called from where he was hiding behind the dark elven sharpshooters. "His cursed scythe can cut through almost anything!"

"I'll take your advice into consideration," the dark general said while he made a come-hither gesture toward the demon.

Eager for his next kill, the horned reaper blurred with speed and launched himself off a spider's back. The human's hand was raised, palm outward and ready to receive the charge on his shield, as if that could save him.

Jadeite's smirk did not falter, even when he felt the reaper's magic wrap like invisible restraints around him. "Bye bye," he quipped when the red demon was committed to his leap. Instead of a shield, a black ellipse appeared in front of the curly-haired blonde, swallowing the fearsome creature whole. The portal sealed up as fast as it had come.

Nero gaped and went nearly apoplectic with rage when he realised that the spell had removed his most valuable minion out of range of either dungeon heart. Things got worse when the funnel-shaped web connecting his dungeon heart with the ceiling inflated like a

balloon and exploded, cutting off the reinforcements from above and sending burning spiders flying like shooting stars. The former warlock saw red. Curse Arachne and her stupid plans! If he was going down here, he would take as many others with him as he could. Like the troll swinging on a spider silk rope like a pirate and hitting a flying vampire in the face so hard it failed to revive, or the knight-type hanging back and tossing knives. Or that bare-chested blonde covered in mud and wielding a scythe. His attention lingered on the woman a bit longer. Oh, and that floating blond arsehole, too! Yes! Well, maybe not. He could fly. Hopefully, some fountaining lava would get him. As Nero's last act of defiance, he ordered his imps to cut down the tall stone pillar on which the entire battle was taking place. He still had a chance. If Mercury had not enough troops left to march on his remaining dungeon heart, he could save himself.

When Ami possessed Tiger, the youma was standing over a sandcastle and pulling a spider's legs out one by one. More legless torsos wailed piteously nearby. Disgusted, Ami squished the animal she was holding between her borrowed hands and surveyed the battle. Her forces were almost at the dungeon heart, and only the constant reinforcements through the silk tube dangling from the ceiling were stalling them. The corners of her lips curved up. She could help with that! One firestorm spell, coming up! As soon as the orange flash above the enemy dungeon heart announced her return, she teleported over to the main bulk of her forces to assist their push.

"Cathy, what's the situa-" Ami gaped and covered her mouth, taken aback by the sight of swordswoman wearing not much more than mud, a loincloth, and a few bits of metal.

"Reaper cut up my sword and kicked me into a clump of spiders, so I had to get a new weapon really fast," the blonde explained, lifting her scythe. "Thanks for the shield charm, by the way. That saved me there."

"I'm glad you are all right," Ami smiled, just when the first strike against the enemy dungeon heart rang out like a bell, raising the spirits of her forces and invigorating them for the final advance. Just

then, the ground shook and let out a deep, rolling groan that easily drowned out the noise of the fighting. In its wake followed a deep silence as all creatures fidgeted and looked around for the source of the danger. Almost as one, the spiders secreted silk threads from their bulbous behinds, launched them at the ceiling, and abandoned the trembling, shaking ground. The silence turned into a panicked cacophony of screams when a crack went through the platform near the edge and part of it broke off. Even the most slow-witted goblins suddenly understood what was going on.

"The pillar! Nero's imps are hollowing it out!" Ami shouted when her giant flies spotted the tiny workers hewing away at the rock with all their might, about halfway down to the lava-filled bottom.

"Can you get us out of here yet?" Cathy asked when the ground wobbled some more under her feet.

"Not until the dungeon heart dies," Ami answered with a grim expression on her face. *"All flies! Hunt down those imps!"* she mentally broadcast her orders. At this rate, the platform would crash down before the dungeon heart could be shattered, especially with the way her minions were panicking and running around like headless chicken. One of the lose white threads of silk dangling from the ceiling drifted past her. "The spider webs!" *Everyone, follow the spiders! Jadeite, Mareki, Umbra, keep the enemy from detaching the threads!*

Ami disappeared as her minions made a mad dash for the closest silk strings, pushing and jostling each other to be the first in line. Goblins, trolls, and warlocks started climbing the ropes, urged to hurry by those behind them and cursed for their slowness. Another wave of panic went through the masses when the platform inclined by several degrees, coinciding with Jadeite releasing the swamp-creating glamour. He needed his magic to affect the curtain-like spider webs above, even though the adjustment he made was minor. Nevertheless, turning even the strings meant for walking over into sticky ones meant that the colony of giant spiders lurking above literally had to remain glued in place.

"Shabon Spray Freezing! Shabon Spray Freezing! Shabon Spray Freezing! Shabon Spray Freezing!" Ami fired the scintillating

bubbles into the imp tunnels as fast as she could go through the motions. She was trying to slow down the collapse and buy time for her soldiers by filling in the gaps with ice, stabilising the rock. "Shabon Spray Freezing! Shabon Spra- aiiiiee!" Suddenly, a swarm of stinging, biting and pinching insects enveloped her, filling her mouth and nostrils and trying to chew through her eyelids. Coughing and choking, she batted at her face while the aggressive insects tried to force themselves down her throat.

"Scream and suffer, you worthless piece of shit!" the swarm buzzed. "I won't let you save them! I won't! I won-"

A bolt of lightning struck Ami's back, sending agonising spasms through her body and frying the insects besetting her. The blackened organisms flaked off her face easily enough, but her body still shook from bloody coughs as it tried to expel the attackers who had done their best to rip open her throat from the inside. She felt strong, cold arms wrap around her from behind, catching her. She hadn't even been aware that she had been falling.

"You can thank me properly later. The spire is about to come down on us, if you hadn't noticed," Nurgil's ice voice said from somewhere behind her neck, making her hackles rise. "I hope you don't mind if I get us out of here."

Already? Were that all of her troops, hanging from the ceiling like garlands? Her Keeper sight informed her that the giant flies and flying youma were sweeping down on the last moving bodies and gathering them up, just as the platform crumbled for real. She didn't miss the many bloody and unmoving ones lying between the corpses, either, before the rock slide thankfully hid them from her view.

Hanging from the ceiling like ugly pearls clinging to many different strings, Ami's surviving minions watched with baited breath as the stone spire broke apart in the middle with a deafening rumble and toppled sideways. The red-pulsing dungeon heart on its tip smashed into the side of the crater and shattered into glittering shards that followed the rest of the avalanche down into the lake of lava, accompanied by terrified, yet still hateful howl.

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Back to the Iceberg

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Queen Beryl knelt on the rock ledge that pointed at the softly-pulsing cocoon floating in the void before it. "Queen Metallia?" the red-haired monarch asked in a hopeful, almost joyous tone. Unfortunately, the huge sack streaked with orange veins remained as silent as the deformed stone skull out of whose maw it hung like a grotesque tongue.

Frowning, Beryl glanced at the crystal ball on the tip of the staff lying before her. She could feel the energy of the Great Ruler still playing around it, more vital than ever since she had fallen into a coma. Disappointed by the lack of reaction, Beryl tried again. "My Queen, are you aware? What is going on?"

Nothing. A flicker of movement drew the evil redhead's gaze down to the crystal ball. An image of that vile blue-haired conspirator had appeared, kneeling next to some scaly, blue pillar. With great satisfaction, Beryl took in the battered and bloody appearance of the soot-covered brat. Served that sailor senshi right. Too bad that whatever had inflicted the damage didn't finish the job. Oh, those black tendrils wrapping around Sailor Mercury had to be Queen Metallia's power. Yes! Crush her! Beryl felt giddy that her Great Ruler's first conscious action would remove this thorn in her side. Her mood came crashing down once events in the crystal ball unfolded further. She gnashed her teeth as she watched the power seep into the girl's body, leaving her unharmed and marking her as one of Metallia's own. The redhead's breath froze at this confirmation of how far the traitors had come in their plan to usurp her position. It made perfect sense for these Silver Millenium fools, of course. Without their precious Moon Princess, they would be powerless against Queen Metallia, and therefore wanted her on their side. Beryl nodded to herself. It was what she would have tried, had their positions be reversed. She suppressed her jealousy, since snapping at the Dark Kingdom's goddess would neither further her agenda, nor be appreciated. Instead, she waited quietly for her ruler

to address her. She waited until the energised orange veins of the cocoon dimmed and the pulses within the membranes slowed down. After several quiet minutes, a horrible suspicion sneaked up on her. "Queen Metallia? It is me, your loyal servant! Let me know your will!"

As the silence stretched longer and longer, the dark queen realised that no answer would be forthcoming. Queen Metallia had gone quiescent again. Beryl growled under her breath. The Great Ruler spoke to that- that *usurper* before going back to sleep? Why did she waste her moment of lucidity on that brat, rather than her, Queen Beryl, who had served her loyally for centuries? She would not stand for it! She would not be replaced! The dark queen rose and turned her back on the cocoon so swiftly that her deep violet dress swished around her, gritting her teeth "Nephrite! To me at once! NEPHRITE!"

Ami was pleasantly surprised to find four of her abducted imps hiding in the rubble of her dungeon, still alive and well after the invasion. On her orders, the little creatures started reclaiming her territory, all of which had slipped from her grasp when she was forced to sink the dungeon heart into its emergency shelter. Her green-glowing hands rose to her throat, erasing some of the damage that Nero's attack had inflicted on her borrowed body. The healing necromancy did nothing to remove the unpleasant taste of the youma's blue blood, though. With the destruction of the enemy dungeon heart, Ami felt her transportation powers return and immediately set out to put them to good use. Her troops dangling from the ceiling wouldn't be able to hold on forever, especially the physically weaker ones. She had to get them back on safe ground as soon as possible, starting with those who looked most likely to slip and fall into the lava deep below. Checking on the status of her dungeon, Ami saw that the imps had only reclaimed part of the giant cave melted into the iceberg by Alphel's dragon yet. It would have to do as a drop-off location. Quickly, she started plucking the weaker members of her forces from their perches. Snyder's armoured gauntlets came lose from the white silk with a wet ripping sound when she sent him away. Sticky? Jadeite's work, then. Ami felt a burst of intense gratefulness toward the dark general. Without him, her losses would have been even more horrible. She was also glad

that Snyder had remembered to activate the physical enhancements that his suit of plate mail could provide, when he had to climb the rope. She probably should prioritise the armour-wearing soldiers, since the added weight could only be a hindrance in this situation. With a thought, Jered disappeared from his spot in the middle of a rope, far away from the bottom and also from the trapped giant spiders in their nest on the ceiling. One dark elf, two dark elves, three dark elves- Ami checked again, but to her chagrin, she couldn't find the remaining two. On to the armoured trolls then.

"Aahhhhhh!" A warlock slipped and dropped into the abyss, his purple robes fluttering around him as his beard trailed him like a comet's tail.

Eyes widening slightly, Ami made him disappear and put him into storage. She'd have to bleed off his momentum somehow when she retrieved him, which had the potential to be rather unpleasant for the man in question. Not as unpleasant as a violent collision with the lava at the bottom of the shaft, though. Back to the armoured trolls. She found Marda right at the top of a strand and glaring at the nearby spiders, who shrank back and tried to look very small and harmless. She'd probably be fine there for a while. Ami wasn't comfortable with the idea of the somewhat rebellious troll anywhere near her dungeon heart while most of the army was away, and decided to send her back last. She sent the five other trolls who had opted to make armour for themselves back, though. Hopefully, that was the same amount that had been summoned to Nero's dungeon heart. The warlocks came next. Ami sighed when she only found sixteen of them, the one she had caught earlier included. The alchemist, one of her first hirelings, was among the missing. Understandable, since he hadn't been very good at spellcasting and specialised in the theoretical fields, but still saddening.

Who next? Cathy, albeit in no danger of falling, was sent back so Jered wouldn't worry about her. The twelve giant flies zipping about would last longer without the goblin passengers they carried, so Ami relieved them of their burden. She did the same for Mareki, who looked as if she was about to toss the quivering, probing mound of tentacles in her arms down into the lava in a fit of disgust. That left the remaining, unarmoured trolls. Ami was relieved to find that all

twenty of the veteran fighters were hanging from the strands, almost unhurt. However, her face fell when she plucked the goblins off their strings. *... thirty-two, thirty-three. Is that all?* In the hopes of finding more surviving greenskins, Ami searched the strings and cave walls that shone reddish in the light from the lava below again, but it was futile. Only about half of her goblin force had survived the confrontation, then. She clenched her fists, feeling guilty for having failed them so. Only the few giant beetles she had hired had fared worse. Ami knew that she shouldn't think badly about the dead, even if they were mere giant beetles, but the strategic part in her mind mercilessly pointed out that the things must have been almost useless. None had survived despite having wings, and hiring more would probably be a waste. Ami sighed. She hated having to evaluate so ruthlessly. Well, that left only the various fliers. A few seconds of concentration later, the huge cave was empty except for the spiders trapped against the ceiling, secure for the moment. Ami scratched her head as she looked up at the mass of wriggling legs and bulbous bodies. What should she do about them? They could become a problem if they returned to Nero's side or escaped into the wild, where they'd either pester her creatures or starve. "Shabon Spray!"

With a quiet gurgle, the summoned fog condensed into her Keeper hand, which she set to loosening the threads fixing the entire sticky mass of spiders to the ceiling.

Cathy's muscles tensed when the cold air brushing over her skin informed her that she had arrived in a new location, but she couldn't see. Dropping into a combat stance, she turned around her own axis and listened into the darkness while her eyes adjusted to the twilight. *Is this Mercury's dungeon?* She could hear the chatter and groans of goblins all around her, their gruff voices echoing off the far-away walls. The sparse torches lining those glittery ice surfaces that bent and curved like molten wax gave her an idea of the vast scale of this cave. "Where was she hiding a room that big?"

By now, her eyes had adjusted to the dark conditions, and she was able to make out the grey-looking silhouettes of the closest creatures.

One of the larger and blockier ones made a beeline for her, clattering as it almost lost its balance on the slippery ground. "Cathy? Cathy!" Jered swept his girlfriend into a hug, relieved at finding her unharmed.

"Eeek! Cold!" the blonde squealed when the metal of his armour suddenly pressed against her bare torso, and she struggled to get loose. "Not that I'm not happy to see you too," she said with a wink when the arm encircling her waist let go, "but that thing you are wearing isn't very comfortable from the outside."

"Whoops, sorry." The wavy-haired man scratched the back of his head as he smiled at Cathy. His gaze soon dropped lower though, fixating on the patches of brighter skin where drying mud was flaking off.

Noticing his stare, Cathy covered her chest with her left hand. With reddening cheeks, she looked around to see whether anyone else was ogling her. "I had almost forgotten about this with all the excitement." She sighed. "I hope Mercury's bad luck isn't contagious. You wouldn't happen to have a spare shirt?"

Jered shook his head, not at all unhappy about being able to enjoy the sights a while longer. "I'm afraid not."

"Right. Could you please get me one from my room? I have to check who else made it."

"I would, but I have no idea where we are." Jered shrugged his shoulders, waving the pauldrons of his plate mail up and down with the gesture. "The cave is leading down deeper into the dungeon, and there's a huge pool of freezing water blocking theother way out."

Cathy looked around, trying to spot something familiar and get her bearings. Through her condensing breath, she could see feint, sizzling sparks in the darkness above. Unlike real stars, she couldn't use them for orientation. "Great." With two swift steps, she approached one of the warlocks and tapped him on the shoulder. To her annoyance, the bushy-bearded wizard's eyes nearly popped out of their sockets when he turned around and noticed her state of undress."Your overcoat. I require it!"

"Uhh. What? But-"

"Now!" Impatiently, Cathy reached for the man's collar and undid the clasp that held the garment together. Before he knew what was happening, she had pulled it off his shoulders, turned her back on him, and draped it over herself. Even though the piece of purple cloth looked half-shredded by the recent battle, it would protect her modesty for the moment. She was still cold though, and looked the warlock up and down over her shoulder. Fumbling with his staff, the black-robed mage frowned, probably pondering whether he should protest at the treatment. "You look unhurt," Cathy snapped. "Magic up a bonfire or something and bring it along. I'll need the light and heat!"

"Yes, Commander." Suitably cowed by her tone, he cast a spell that turned the skull-shaped tip of his staff into a blue-burning torch and followed after her.

With the comforting glow of the light source radiating heat at her back, Cathy did a preliminary survey of the troops sitting around in the cavern. At first glance, none of them seemed seriously hurt, which was less encouraging than it sounded. Those who had been seriously hurt wouldn't have made it to the spider threads, the swordswoman thought. With a shudder, she remembered these terrible moments when the ground seemed to drop away under her feet while she ran for one of the life-saving strings. Next to her, an orderly file of goblins with various bleeding scratches and similar ailments was slowly moving forward toward a short figure whose armour rattled as if an entire nest of hyperactive rats was running around within. Red hair in a bowl cut topped the portly face that appeared above the armoured breastplate.

Snyder stopped concentrating on his current green-skinned patient when he spotted Cathy and Jered approach, and forced a small smile through his chattering teeth. "I am glad to see that you all survived the recent debacle. T-that was an experience I do not wish to ever repeat," he said in a small voice. "I do not like heights. I like them even less when all that separates me from a long, fatal drop is a thin thread and a suit of armour whose enchantments could give out at any moment." He sat down. "Even remembering it makes my knees weak."

"Good to see you are still in one piece," Jered grinned. "I was a bit worried there. You aren't really a fighter."

"Oh, well, th-the trolls and dark elves guarded me well," the acolyte replied, "having a c-competent healer like me nearby is a great boon in any battle!"

"I see you are recovering from the fright already," Cathy snorted. "We are going to follow this cavern to see if it leads back to the main dungeon. You just stay here until Mercury returns, okay?"

"That was my intention all along," Snyder confirmed and waved the next goblin closer.

"All right, then." The swordswoman held onto her scythe for balance when she walked down the shallow incline leading deeper into the tunnel-like cavern. "Stupid reapers and their stupid outfits," she muttered when her armoured boots slipped on wet ice and almost sent her stumbling into an oddly-shaped pool of ice water. "And you, shut up!" she glowered at the warlock snickering behind her.

"That's one strange puddle," Jered commented as he peered into depression. "It almost looks like a four-fingered hand."

"Not a hand." Cathy said, paling as she stepped over one of the cracks extending outward from the hole. "That's a *footprint*."

"What? That would mean that the owner's toes are longer than you are!" Jered said. He fell silent, and Cathy could see the furrows on his brow that always appeared when he was deep in thought. "Given the size of this footprint, the entire creature must have been..." he looked up at the ceiling, where sparks erupted from broken cables in some spots, and gulped. "I- I think this place *is* the familiar part of the dungeon."

"That big?" the warlock said behind them and coughed into his hand. "I just remembered that I have something important to do back the way we came!" He turned around, but before he could take the first step, the wicked curve of Cathy's scythe appeared in his path, right at neck height.

Holding the weapon by the haft, the blonde shook her head. "You stay. Since the dungeon is still here, Mercury must have gotten rid of whatever made these prints. Knowing her, I wouldn't even be surprised if she faked them to scare off other invaders!"

"R-right you are," the warlock conceded, his eyes crossing as he watched the cutting edge of the weapon gleam in the light of his torch.

With each step that the trio took deeper into the cavern, the slow and steady rumble of the dungeon heart became louder. More and more pools of water and scattered, tiny holes lined their route through the unnaturally smooth tunnel. Cathy knelt down and peered into the transparent ground. "Do you see all those tiny black clumps at the bottom of shafts of clearer ice? I think they are fragments of hot metal that burned their path down. Don't you agree? Hello? Guys?" When the warlock's staff clattered to the floor, barely missing her, she looked up in irritation - only to see her companions stand still like statues and gape at something further down the cave, where meter-wide cracks and broken shards surrounded a small hill that blocked the way. Then, as if a switch had been flicked in her brain, she recognised the hill as the tail end of an absolutely huge dragon, and she joined the others in slack-jawed amazement. "She killed *THAT*, on her own, and was still back in time for the conclusion of the battle against Nero? HOW?" the blonde screeched.

"That size. It must have been truly ancient," Jered said in awe.

"The eldest." The warlock wobbled on his legs as if he might faint any moment now. He was rubbing his hands so hard that his wide sleeves swayed around his lanky arms, and muttered almost to himself "So huge. Normal dragons don't get old enough to grow that big. And blue scales. It's unique." His tone was almost reverent when he looked at the others with a gleam in his eyes. "Do you know what that means?"

"That Mercury is seriously scary?" Jered ventured.

"No! Well, that too," the dark mage granted, "but most of all, it means that this carcass is worth a fortune! Do you have any idea

how magic it must have incorporated into its body during the millennia?"

Cathy and Jered answered with identical blank looks.

"No, of course you wouldn't have the necessary education. Philistines." the warlock shook his head sadly. "Long story short, it's an artificer's dream come true!"

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Cleaning Up

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Accompanied by the sound of tearing silk, Ami's Keeper hand ripped the last clump of tied-up spiders from the ceiling. They slowly rotated around their own axis as they plummeted into the lava-filled depths, shooting strings in all directions. Unfortunately for the arachnids, their combined weight was too much for any single life line, and each one snapped almost as soon as it made contact with the side walls. Ami didn't even wait for them to land and teleported herself back to the dungeon, announcing her return to the torch-lit cavern with a flash of blue, snowflake-spewing brigthtness. Hovering in the air, she looked down at the many heads that turned in her direction, their gazes meeting her red-glowing eyes. *Not enough. So many dead,* Ami thought and closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. She didn't have time to feel sorry for the lost, though. That would come later. She would not waste the opportunity that the fallen had bought with their deaths. Her eyes opened, gleaming fiery red with determination. She would make sure this couldn't happen again! She needed a defence against that terrifying spell, or, failing that, to make sure that Nero would no longer be around to use it once more. "Everyone! I'm glad to see that you made it through alive, but our task isn't done yet. While banished for the moment, the enemy Keeper, Nero, is still alive! We will change that."

The reaction of the crowd was mixed. A few nasty, eager grins spread on green faces at the thought of striking back at the enemy on their own terms. The more cautious or tired creatures just looked weary and let their ears droop or shoulders slump.

"There is no time to lose! We must strike before he can recover from his banishment!" At this point, Ami noticed that Jered and Cathy weren't here. A flex of mental exertion fixed the problem, transporting them before her.

The blonde swordswoman appeared in a stooped pose, her arms extended as if she was climbing up something. Bereft of that perch,

she staggered, but Jered was quick enough to grab her by the shoulder and prevent her from falling. She straightened, and upon spotting Mercury, extended her arm and pointed down the cave. "That. You." She looked back at Mercury. "Dragon. How?"

"Oh, you found that?" Ami put her hands together nervously. She wasn't all that eager to explain how she had almost unleashed Metallia by accident. "I'll explain later!" she blurted out. "For now, we need to get ready to strike back at Nero! Goblins!"

The greenskins, most in some variation of the reaper outfit, looked startled at being addressed so suddenly by their Keeper.

"All surviving pilots, to the right wall!" Ami pointed with her clawed index finger. About a third of the group shuffled over. "All those of you who want to become pilots, over there!"

Shouts of protest came from the crowd as the enthusiastic goblins stampeded through it, pushing and jostling each other in their haste. Ami blinked when only their cook remained sitting before her, balancing a ladle on her fat belly and slurping down the contents of a severed spider leg.

"Cathy, please take them all to the new automaton control centre I showed you earlier. Follow that imp." Ami mentally ordered one of the scavenged little workers to dig a new passage leading to the underground tunnel connecting her iceberg to the mainland. That done, she addressed the robed magicians waiting before her. "Warlocks! Since I cannot enter an area I have been previously banished from, the responsibility for the logistics of this operation will rest upon your shoulders." She saw some cross their arms in response to that declaration, indicating that they weren't too happy about it, but there was no grumbling. At this point, the fact that she was supposed to be an absolute monarch was rather useful. She summoned her visor and used it to distinguish the four most battered members of the flock. "You, you, you, and you," Her pointed index finger stabbed in the individuals' direction, "you four will be on scrying duty, and will keep me updated on enemy troop compositions, locations, and so on." She paused. "Jadeite! Umbra!"

The grey-uniformed general shimmered into existence with a cocky

smile, looking none the worse for wear from the recent combat. Ami returned a more polite smile and watched Umbra condense out of a veil of sudden darkness. The youma's silhouette was bent due to her baby-sized, regenerating arm, which she hid underneath her blood-spattered black coat. She inclined her head respectfully. "Lady Mercury?"

"Jadeite, Umbra. I need your teleportation powers to get some warlocks close to the enemy dungeon so that they can summon the rest of the forces. Jadeite, you will have to prepare a safe chamber for them to conduct the rituals. Defend them in case they are detected. Without Nero around to command his imps, the enemy should not be able to dig his way in before all automatons are in position. Nevertheless, I want everyone to remain on guard, since Arachne may still be active in the area."

"Sounds reasonable," Jadeite said. "Will I be joining the assault?"

"That depends on the enemy forces," Ami said. "Actually, where did you send the enemy reaper? He'd be the greatest danger there, short of any traps."

"I sent him to the Underworld," the blond general replied. "Even if he somehow finds his way back to his master, he'll never make it there in time on foot."

Ami inclined her head in a quick nod. "Good." She let her gaze sweep over the assembled troops, wondering whether she should send Marda and the trolls along on the assault. She decided against it. It wouldn't do to leave her home entirely undefended if Wemos chose to attack. Nurgil wouldn't do either, since Nero wouldn't have lasted this long if he hadn't protected his dungeon against vampires. "Oh, and Jadeite, don't forget to incorporate a water-filled trench into the warlocks' defences."

"Of course."

"Good! Everyone, you know what to do! Please get started!" Ami let herself drift to the ground as her various employees dashed off to follow her instructions. She'd have to sit this battle out, but that didn't mean that she could be idle. There was a lot of battle damage to her

dungeon to fix.

"Sailor Moon, move!"

Warned, the pig-tailed blonde lunged to the right, landing flat in the grass just as a vertical arc of greyish-white power hurtled past and dug a furrow into the ground. Getting up, she got as far as lifting herself to one knee when part of Nephrite's mansion came crashing down behind her. With a yelp, she threw herself back into the leaves and covered her head with both hands. When the dust cleared, she risked craning her neck and peering left and right to search for her opponent. She found him above. In the red twilight lit by burning trees, Nephrite flowed like a demonic spectre. His eyes shone white with power and his long hair waved around him like seaweed as he intoned his next spell "I ask for power from the stars!"

Sailor Moon watched as a great swirl of light gathered in his cupped hands and shot forward like a shower of shooting stars before she could fully get up. Still on all fours, she froze, staring wide-eyed at the incoming attack.

"Sailor Moon!" Mars shouted in fright, gripping the pillar of the veranda she was steadying herself against harder.

"Supreme Thunder!" Arcs of lightning sprang from Sailor Jupiters arms, flashing toward the dark general's attack. To the pony-tailed girl's horror, the individual components of Nephrite's attack scattered, flowing around the flickering stream of bolts.

Sailor Moon clenched her eyelids shut, bracing for a hit. Miniature explosions around her stirred up blossoming fountains of dirt that hit her with stinging shards all over. A moment later, the chain of booms stopped, and all was silent except for the crackling of burning wood. She risked opening an eye, and saw that she was sitting on a small patch of grass surrounded by cratered earth. Miraculously, none of the tiny energy blasts had hit her directly.

"Whoa," the tall brunette in the green skirt commented as she limped over to Moon's side and helped her to her feet, "his aim just

can't be that bad! It's almost as if even the stars hate his guts!"

If looks could kill, Sailor Jupiter would have keeled over dead from the offended glare that the hovering dark general directed at her.

"Fire Soul!" Sailor Mars took the initiative, prompting him to fade away before the spiralling fireball could hit him.

"Were did he go now?" Sailor Moon asked. Standing back to back with the other battered girls, she stared into the surrounding walls of flame, looking for motion.

"On the roof!" Luna's voice called out, warning the soldiers about their opponent's new location.

Nephrite stood on the highest gable of his mansion, heedless of the tongues of fire licking out of the round window underneath. In his grey uniform, he looked like a shadow against the backdrop of the sky. He didn't bother with astrology this time and raised his right hand. A widening black twister shot down from it, catching the three girls in its area.

"Argh! I can't move!" Sailor Mars complained.

Jupiter frantically batted at one of the many smouldering leaves caught with them in the dark torrent. "Ow! Guys, do you have a plan?"

Next to her, Sailor Moon cringed with her arms raised to shield her face against the onslaught of dark energy. "I wish Mercury was here to give us some cover!"

On the rooftop, Nephrite started laughing as he watched black energy arc between the sailor senshi trapped in his attack. The sight was almost enough to make up for the loss of his car. Almost.

"Nephrite! To me at once"

What? Now? Queen Beryl had the worst timing. Oh well, she would excuse him for making her wait for a bit if he returned with news of complete victory.

"NEPHRITE!"

To his dismay, the dark general found himself tugged irresistibly back to the Dark Kingdom by his impatient Queen's power. "This isn't over yet!" he shouted at the girls on the ground before he sank into a dark ellipse.

"He ran away?" Sailor Moon blinked at the empty rooftop, baffled at the opponents inexplicable retreat. "Why?"

A small black cat darted out of her hiding place in the rubble."Everyone! We have to leave before the fire fighters arrive," Luna shouted. In the distance, the sound of sirens was getting louder.

"Right!" Panting, Sailor Mars was looking for a safe way through the burning wood when she spotted a blurring motion above. A black cloak fluttered, and she whirled to face it, only to see a sharp crystal spike thud into the ground where Sailor Moon had just been standing. The icicle-like weapon hummed from the force of the impact and remained standing.

The blonde let out a squeal when she was suddenly gathered up into strong arms, but she settled down once she recognised the white mask and formal wear of her saviour. "Tuxedo Mask!"

Sailor Mars felt a twinge of jealousy at seeing her blonde friend in Mamoru's arms, but she focused on the more important aspect of the situation: locating their attacker. Not too hard, since she only had to back-track the path of the projectile and follow the trail of cherry blossoms to find the effeminate man sitting on thin air, chuckling quietly to himself. "Zoisite!"

"I don't know why Nephrite opted to not finish you off, but I'm not going to pass up an opportunity like this!" the dark general conjured another sharp crystal and grinned down at the exhausted girls.

Not even Ami's Keeper sight worked in the region she had lost one of her dungeon hearts in, but that didn't mean that she was reduced

to watching the battle in a crystal ball. Her remote vision worked perfectly fine within her own dungeon, and she could look at the screens inside the pilot capsules and observe events from the perspective of the automatons. Nevertheless, she had joined the four scrying warlocks in the small replica of the command centre she had created on the mainland. The dragon's rampage had taken out the original's power cables, rendering its wall windows unsuitable for prolonged use with only her magician's personal mana supply.

"Haha, look at that bot go! Like a bowling ball!" one of the trolls commented the gruesome demise of eight spiders that got underfoot a reaperbot charging down a straight hallway. He raised his fist in a cheer, and almost hit Ami's floating form in the leg.

Maybe she should have made the new chamber larger. In hindsight, it should have been obvious that all the troops who had nothing else to do would congregate here to follow the battle, filling the room with the smell of sweaty creatures. She didn't have the heart to throw them out, since they were enjoying the sight of the one-sided slaughter immensely. It was just what was needed to raise morale after the costly battle two hours ago. The enthusiastic roaring of the crowd was infectious, and she noticed that she was grinning just like them when the tide of black, scythe-wielding metal hacked apart Nero's few remaining forces that couldn't get away fast enough. The enemy Keeper had obviously bet everything on his spell succeeding, cannibalising many of his rooms to fund his other dungeon. His defences were woefully inadequate to stop her bots, which were largely impervious to the sparse spiders and skeletons that milled about the place. Only the traps were a serious problem. The reaperbot closest to the enemy dungeon heart was holding the broken shells of two shattered companions in front of itself like a shield as it moved down the corridor, where spiked steel pendulums the size of its torso whistled across the path in completely random intervals. With a courageous jump, it moved past one of those darks gaps in the wall, only for bolts of lightning to flash down on the metal warrior from studs in the ceiling. Red-hot metal flowed like blood from the impact points. Ami heard the crowd gasp as a large, round boulder dropped from a hatch in the ceiling and barrelled toward the largest concentration of automatons, who had no room in the confined quarters to dodge. The gasps turned into an awed murmur

when the grey-uniformed blonde floating behind the broad-shouldered bots extended his right arm, stopping the corridor-filling projectile cold. Jadeite cackled and flicked his wrist. With a shimmer of distorted air, the boulder reversed direction and bounced away through the trap-filled hallway, crashing through the swinging giant maces as it went. The remaining defences didn't even slow down Ami's soldiers, and it didn't take long for them to reach the enemy dungeon heart and face the last line of defence. Ami cringed at the pitiful sight of imps throwing themselves at the horned automatons, swinging their picks with desperate zeal. *"Cathy, have the goblins ignore the imps until the dungeon heart is down! They'll be useful if we can capture them!"*

"Understood. Take that Nero, you bastard!"

After relaying Mercury's orders, Cathy laughed in glee at the sight of heavy blows raining down on the artefact anchoring the former torturer to life. One of the animated constructs actually took damage from an imp when it tripped over the big-eyed creature and collided with the stairs leading up to the shrinking crystal orb. Despite the dents in its helmet, it got up again. The worker smeared over its breastplate was not so lucky. Soon enough, the enemy dungeon heart had shrunk to the size of a pumpkin and pulsed so rapidly that it looked bright white. Lightning arced from the cracks in its surface as if the light within was trying to escape, and then the entire construct shattered. The reaperbots stumbled as the dais supporting the dungeon heart turned to rubble and its surrounding pillars collapsed, and the dungeon shook and groaned around them, making the ornamentations on the wall flake off like dead leaves. Ami thought she could hear Cathy's whoop of joy even through the metres of rock that separated the two chambers and over the cheering of the crowd. She, too, was smiling brightly in satisfaction, revealing the fangs of her youma body. The most difficult to dislodge enemy was gone! On the whole, the assault had been extremely anti-climactic, which suited her just fine. It meant that everything had gone right, for once. "Good work, everyone!" Now she only hoped that the scavenging teams would be able to retrieve Nero's spellbooks from the ruins.

"Zoi!" A large shard of crystal flew from Zoisite's left hand, forcing Sailor Mars to leap aside. With his right, the strawberry-blonde general hacked at Tuxedo Mask with a crystalline sword. His target parried with his cane and counter-attacked. The rapid-fire impacts of the weapons echoed across the clearing as the duellists circled each other. Out of easy striking distance, Sailor Moon, Mars, and Jupiter stood and watched the two fighters who were half-obstructed by Tuxedo Mask's waving cloak, their poses tense. As much as they wanted to, the girls didn't risk taking a shot at Zoisite for fear of hitting their ally. Someone else didn't have these reservations, though. A blast of ghostly white struck the dark general in the back and catapulted him away. Immediately, the effeminate man retreated into the air and looked for his attacker. When he recognised the figure, the surprise almost rendered him speechless. The senshi mirrored his wide-eyed expression when Nephrite walked out of the burning woods, grinning.

"Nephrite, you traitor!" the Zoisite shouted in outrage as he retreated into the air and brushed some blood from his lips. His expression turned into a malevolent smirk. "Queen Beryl will have your head for this," he said cheerfully.

"I don't think so," Nephrite said, looking smug. "Queen Beryl has declared that the Sailor senshi are not to be harmed. I was just making sure that you wouldn't accidentally break her command."

"WHAT?" Zoisite shouted, echoed by the three girls on the ground. "Why? I don't believe you!"

"You are welcome to ask her yourself," Nephrite said and waved his hand dismissively, since he knew how much it irritated the younger general. He didn't quite understand his Queen's sudden change of heart either, but there was no reason to let his rival know that.

"Oh, I will." With a pout, Zoisite disappeared, leaving nothing but a shower of cherry blossoms behind.

The three senshi turned to face Nephrite, taking defensive stances. None of their expressions were very friendly.

"Nephrite! What is the meaning of this?" Mars was the first to speak

up.

"Just what I said," the long-haired man said, crossing his arms. "Queen Beryl was so impressed by Sailor Mercury's work that she is willing to negotiate with you, as long as you cease your interference and subversive actions."

"Subversive what?" Mars blinked.

"And let you get away with preying on the innocent? Ne-" The rest of Sailor Moon's exclamation became an indistinguishable mumble when a slender hand covered her mouth.

Mars leaned in close to her friend's ear and whispered "Wait, this could be part of some plan that Mercury arranged. We shouldn't just throw the opportunity away before we have asked her what's going on!"

"But-"

"Just what did Sailor Mercury do?" Jupiter asked.

Nephrite shrugged his shoulders at the tall brunette's question. "My Queen didn't see it fit to share. I'm just the messenger." His eyes darted over to the burnt-out wreck of his sports car for an instant. "Believe me, I'm not all that happy about this arrangement."

"We'll need some time to consult about this," Mars stepped forward and took the initiative, not letting Sailor Moon get another word in. "We'll leave a message here if we are interested." She pointed with her thumb at the ruins of Nephrite's mansion.

"Whatever. I have delivered her offer. Take it or leave it, I don't care." Nephrite turned transparent and vanished from sight, leaving the confused senshi alone.

Back in her own body, Ami tuned out the sounds of goblin music, which consisted for the most part of somewhat rhythmic drumming, and contemplated her next steps. She'd have to secure her dungeon heart properly, since the makeshift wall she had hidden it with and

the dragon corpse behind just wouldn't help much in case of an attack. That also meant that she had to get rid of the enormous cadaver somehow. Given its enormous mass, it might be easier to move the heart instead. Taking recent events into account, she was getting serious misgivings about the security of her iceberg.

"Keeper! Keeeeper!"

The door to her study flew open with a bang, letting the discordant singing of trolls and warlocks drunk on conjured ale pour into the room, along with the smell of roasted meat. Ami didn't begrudge the creatures their victory celebration, but it was all a bit too rough and unrefined for her to join in. Startled, she looked at the tiny green intruder that was standing in the entrance.

The panting goblin was shivering and so pale that its skin was almost yellow. "K-Keeper! The portal! Need to look quick!"

Ami's eyes widened as she focused her Keeper power on the indicated location. "Darn it!" In the time it took the goblin to blink, she turned into a black shadow that sunk into his body, seizing control. Eyes flaring red, the tiny creature appeared before the dungeon's Underworld portal, accompanied by Ami's largest water hand to date. In the orange glow between the four megaliths forming the portal's frame towered a red, horned figure with a grin that was nothing but teeth. Nero's reaper. His presence alarmed Ami, but she was confident she could beat him. With her powers fully functional, it was only a matter of time until she could put him down for good. *The only question is how many he will kill before I can stop him,* she thought with a wince. It took her a moment to notice that the white-eyed demon was not really there. His image in the portal wavered as if underwater and looked slightly transparent. He was clearly standing before another portal, but Ami didn't know where, which made targeting him a bit difficult. The ball of summoned lightning in her green-skinned hands crackled with nowhere to go.

"Ah, Keepers," the demon spoke in a rumbling voice that was rusty from long disuse. He turned his head slightly to the left, and Ami got the feeling that he wasn't talking to her alone. "Make me an offer! What is my allegiance worth to you?"

Ami cocked her head. The monster was seeking employment? She didn't want a murderous psychopathic beast like him! He had slaughtered so many of her goblins! The more rational part of her insisted that she wanted to see him in Wemos' employ even less. She furrowed her brows. What could she offer him that he wanted and that wouldn't be too distasteful? Gold? She doubted the demon would go for that. From what she knew about reaper demons, there was only one thing they truly cherished. Actually, there was one task on her long list of things to do that his talents were almost ideal for. She saw the reaper turn to the left, apparently listening to something she couldn't hear. "All right," she began, hoping that she had judged him correctly. "If you serve me, then my first order to you will be to kill *every ghost and skeleton on this continent*!"

"DEAL!" The speed with which the scythe-wielding monstrosity darted through the portal and grabbed her hand was almost frightening. In the back of her mind, she could feel the goblin she was possessing pass out. If it hadn't been for the forming minion link, Ami would have transported herself away in an instant.

"Um. Well. You know what to do. *Only* the ghosts and skeletons, though! Get started. I'll have a room ready for you later," she ordered, and transported the monster to the surface. As soon as he was gone, she let out a long, relieved breath, and almost fell over. Controlling a possessed body when the owner was unconscious and unable to do all the subconscious stuff was more trouble than it was worth, as she was finding out. With a crackling pop, she darted out of the goblin, catching his slumping form before colour had fully returned to her tar-like form. In the corridor behind her, she heard two pairs of footsteps approach at a run.

Wheezing, Jered skidded to a halt. He was out of his plate armour and back in his usual green shirt and trouser combination. The red tip of his nose was new though. He pointed at the spot the reaper had just occupied. "Mercury? W-was that-?"

Ami nodded as she gently deposited the unconscious goblin on the ground. "What are you two doing here?"

"An odd goblin ran through the hall a minute or so ago, gibbering about the portal and making a racket, so we came to check." Cathy's

face was flushed, but not from exertion. She was still in senshi form, after all. "So, you really hired-?"

Ami nodded again, hoping they wouldn't be too angry about that rather questionable decision.

"Fuck. I need another drink," Cathy said, and glanced over at the blue-haired girl. "Actually, so do you. Have some fun once in a while!"

Ami didn't like the gleam in the blonde's eyes as she advanced on her. "But-"

"I concur," Jered said from behind the young Keeper. When had he gotten there?

"Eeek!" Ami suddenly found herself between her two slightly inebriated companions, supported by one arm under each shoulder, and being dragged bodily toward the sounds of the festivities. She hung her head. At least they hadn't asked about why her uniform had changed colour yet.

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Beryl's Plan

Originally on 2010-11-02T20:27:00

Somehow, Cathy and Jered had managed to manoeuvre Mercury to the victory party without the young Keeper vanishing from their grasp. The huge cavern left by the dragon's invasion provided more than enough room for festivities, and Ami had quickly provided furniture and a stone floor for the opportunity. Her employees had arranged the tables in a square that missed one side and framed a huge bonfire. As the Keeper, she got the seat of honour on the side opposite the open one, right in the middle. From there, she had a good view of the roast pig that Brugli was turning over the central fire, and of the creatures seated at the tables to her left and right. All around her, the trolls, warlocks, and goblins clinked glasses, laughing and exchanging boasts about their exploits in the recent battle. Ami was a bit surprised about the cheerful atmosphere despite the recent losses. She didn't think it was the right way to honour the dead, but perhaps the culture in this world was simply different. Or perhaps the servants of evil simply didn't form emotional attachments between each other and didn't care about the lost. Ami let her gaze wander over the drinking and singing creatures from the left to the right, feeling a pang of guilt when she realised how many were absent and not even missed. It was so sad. To hide the wetness in her eyes, she looked down at the frothy liquid in the mug before her. It was the same ale that the others were all guzzling down with relish. A finger tapped Ami on her right shoulder.

"Oh, come on, you can't be going on about this 'too young to drink' thing again," Cathy said as she noticed Mercury's untouched drink. "Look, if you mature enough to lead all of us into battle, you are mature enough to drink! Just try it." The rosy-cheeked woman raised her own mug to her lips and leaned back, chugging down half its contents in one go, and then put her arm around Jered to her right and skidded closer to him.

Ami experimentally lifted her mug. In a way, she was responsible for all of the deaths this day, wasn't she? From what she had heard,

alcohol helped to forget. Besides, the ale was conjured and would disappear from her system soon enough, so having some was fine, right? She certainly could use some cheering up. Closing her eyes, Ami took a deep sip. She didn't much care for the taste, to be honest, but she was clearly in the minority. She did feel a bit warmer when she put her half-emptied glass down, but not significantly different. Maybe she should try more? The next, larger gulp went down her throat too quickly, and she choked on the strong brew. As she coughed, she felt a strong hand reach over from the left and pat her on the back. Jadeite! She giggled as the coughing fit subsided. Having him so close was one redeeming quality of this situation, and with a delighted sigh, she leaned to the left until her head was resting against his shoulder. To her disappointment, he didn't really react, aside from sparing a glance at her blackened uniform. In fact, she felt his muscles tense at the contact. Why didn't he appreciate her? Was she too plain for him? Or was he interested in someone else? A horrible thought almost made her gasp out loud. Could it be that he was gay? She needed another drink! A moment later, she settled back against him, her thirst slaked. This required some careful observation.

Jadeite couldn't have been more nervous if someone had dumped a ticking time bomb onto his lap. The comparison was uncharitable to the red-faced girl who was using his legs as a pillow, but he found it fitting. It wasn't even the presence of Metallia's power radiating from her body, stronger than from anyone short of Beryl herself, that set him on edge. He was curious about how that had happened, but assumed that it was related to her senshi uniform blackening. A favourable development, all things considered, and not too alarming. The intense aura even helped him suppress the strange impulse to brush with his hand through that soft-looking blue hair. No, what had him worried for life and limb was the fact that Mercury's large eyes were watching him very intently, despite her obvious inebriation. He couldn't help notice that her attention increased whenever his gaze wandered toward one of the other females in the room. Now, the Dark Kingdom wasn't the right place to learn about love. Jealousy, however, was an emotion Jadeite was very familiar with. Thus, he exerted considerable willpower to not watch the enticing sight of the

crazy dark elf undulating to goblin music and slowly doffing her clothes, accompanied by wolf whistles. He also carefully failed to look to the right, where Cathy was showing a considerable amount of leg. Under the current circumstances, it was fortunate that there weren't too many attractive females in the dungeon. Mareki in human form was the third and last, and she was seated safely amidst a group of warlocks. The magicians in question were listening intently to one of their members who was spreading his arms to communicate huge size and gesturing repeatedly toward the back of the cave. Not that Jadeite was interested in her anyway. She was a redhead, just like queen Beryl. It was not by chance that most of the youma he chose to boss around and send on missions had been redheads. Petty, yes, but he *was* evil. In any case, he felt justified in his belief that his continued well-being depended on not showing any interest in any of the three. His secret research indicated that jealous human women were no less prone to vicious and irrational actions than jealous youma. He shuddered at what his fellow generals would say if they found out that he read romance novels in his spare time, even if it was purely for research purposes. The things were more confusing than helpful, anyway, and didn't exactly shed light on what he should do with regard to Mercury's interest in him. Somehow, he didn't think she would be impressed if he serenaded her from below a balcony. Not that she had a balcony in this dungeon. Besides, he couldn't sing. For now, he just hoped she'd fall asleep before his legs did.

Both wings of the door to Baron Leopold's office hit the walls with a bang as the armour-clad noble burst through the opening, blue cape waving behind him. His chest swelled as he sucked in air for a loud roar. "LEON! Ready the men! We ride out this afternoon!" His moustache whipped up and down in concert with his heavy footsteps as he hurried down the corridor. A courtier in red livery jumped out of the baron's path and flattened himself against the wall, right next to the window that was still vibrating from Leopold's shout. He almost didn't notice the cloaked figure moving noiselessly at the noble's side like a shadow.

"Aren't you interested at all to learn who gave us the location of

three of Arachne's dungeons?" The Spymaster asked through the black cloth covering his face, using a much more reasonable volume than the tall man he was sharing intelligence with.

"Nah. Your wizards have verified the information, that's good enough!"

"Well, the hints were provided by an anonymous informant, but my contacts were able to trace them back to the source. Keeper Alphel. Interested yet?"

The cadence of Leopold's steps didn't change. "Keeper, huh?" He twisted the ends of his bushy moustache, frowning. "Alphel. The name sounds vaguely familiar."

"You may need to consult the history books for this one. She last showed her hand nearly two centuries ago."

"Huh, history? Oh, I remember. The one who turned tail and went into hiding after the elves shot down her unholy abomination of a dragon! That thing would have been a joy to hunt!"

"Provided one doesn't mind being on fire. The forests of Danai still haven't recovered their former glory, or so I have been told." There was no hint of overt disapproval in the Spymaster's guarded tone.

"They never found a corpse, if I recall correctly," Leopold pondered.

"Sorry to disappoint, but the beast perished yesterday during an assault on Keeper Mercury's dungeon. Our diviner tasked to observe her got a glimpse of the corpse. In any case, you have viler prey to hunt," the black-cloaked figure reminded him.

"Huh?" Leopold almost missed a step. "Mercury foiled me again?" His expression soured. "On the Avatar Islands?" He hadn't yet forgiven her for exchanging him for a tentacle monster, of all things. The loss of face! Not that he was in the habit of forgiving Keepers anything, anyway.

"Indeed. Our wizard didn't see how, since he was observing a different battle that took place at the same time, but her dungeon took considerable damage. I assume that it will please you to hear

that she destroyed that oily warlock who had escaped from our custody and was elevated to full Keeper by Arachne."

"Good. One less Keeper in the world. Have you found out yet what's attracting them to that desolate place? They are over it like flies over-" The Baron fell silent and nodded a greeting as he passed two halberd-wielding guards, causing them to salute.

"Keeper Mercury, most likely. Morrigan and Alphel worship the Mighty Tyrant, and since she humiliated all he stands for in that duel..."

"Hah, pissed off a dark god and stomped four Keepers in less than that many days! If she wasn't an irredeemable monster and a blight upon the world, I'd almost admire her style!"

"As for Arachne, you can imagine why she would seek revenge against her," the spymaster said, ignoring the Baron's amused snort. "I assume that Alphel ratting Arachne out is vengeance for the loss of her pet. The two simultaneous attacks on Keeper Mercury cannot have been coincidence. As far as my analysts can tell, Arachne invested a mere pittance into her activities against Mercury."

"The more infighting between those fiends the better for us. So why did Mercury go to the Avatar Islands? That weather control thing you speculated about?"

The hooded man's shoulders moved in a shrug. "I assume we are going to find out soon. Since she is clearly much more powerful than we were led to believe, things don't bode well for her final opponent."

"Silence! Remember your place!" Queen Beryl shouted, causing the two generals standing before her throne to cringe and bow.

"I apologize." Nephrite, still smelling of smoke, bowed. Zoisite, standing to his left, mimicked the motion.

"While I certainly don't have to explain my decisions to you, I shall indulge you this time," the purple-clad queen continued, shifting her

weight. "You wondered why I ordered you to stop going after the sailor senshi?"

"The question did cross my mind," Nephrite admitted.

"Sailor Mercury and that traitor, Jadeite, are gathering energy for our Great Ruler to gain her favour for themselves," Beryl explained, waving her fingers over her crystal ball. She suppressed a smile at her underlings' baffled expressions. "We will let them. They operate without interference in a different world, so we cannot compete."

"But my Queen, why? We can't just give up!" Zoisite complained.

Now, the witch queen really smiled, showing her fangs. "Of course not. They are fools. In the end, what our Great Ruler desires above anything else is the Silver Crystal. We will focus all our efforts on that single goal, without them disturbing our plans! Let them think they have won and do the menial work for us! It shall all be for naught!" *And once I find a way to get to that world, Jadeite will wish he was back in Eternal Sleep.* She leaned forward, orange eyes gleaming. "Nephrite! The black crystal you were developing - do you have it?"

The long-haired dark general took a confident step forward as he produced a six-sided elongated crystal and let it hover over his palm. "My finest creation yet. With its help, finding the Silver Crystal will only be a matter of time."

"Good. Give it to Zoisite."

"What? But-" Nephrite snapped in disbelief, while the younger general's sour expression turned into a smirk.

"Do it! You made one, you can make another," Beryl dismissed his protest. Zoisite smiled smugly.

"Yes, my Queen." Defeated, Nephrite gritted his teeth as he handed the elongated black device over to his rival.

"Zoisite. Bring me the Silver Crystal. Nephrite, go make a second dark crystal. Our Great Ruler counts on you!"

"I won't disappoint you," the effeminate general said and disappeared mid-bow, littering the floor with flower petals. Nephrite threw a dark look at his previous location and slowly faded from sight.

Beryl remained seated, alone with her thoughts. Her expression turned into a sneer. "Kunzite. How goes your special project?"

A tall man, slightly older than Nephrite, stepped from the shadows and stopped some distance from the throne. Kunzite wore his uniform with a white cape that matched his hair and visually distinguished him from the other dark generals, as befitting his position as the most powerful of the four. "Unfortunately, my efforts to follow Sailor Mercury have run into a seemingly insurmountable obstacle."

"Are you saying that you, who specialises in spatial manipulation, are unable to replicate *Jadeite's* feat?" Beryl screeched, frowning deeply underneath her boomerang-shaped tiara.

"Hardly." Even faced with Queen Beryl's anger, Kunzite stood calm and collected. "Give me a sailor senshi, and I can place her on that world with trivial effort." He saw his queen's nails dig into the stone of her armrests, and decided that he had better explain himself quickly. "From my analysis, the intrinsic energy signature of the target world is similar to our own, which means that there is a minimal degree of repulsion. While insignificant in almost every respect, the effect is enough to throw youma off course during transit through the chaotic inter-dimensional medium. Without some form of guidance, we will not be able to reach that world. In contrasts, our enemies would find travel easier than normal."

The black orb floating between Beryl's hands burst into life, almost blinding Kunzite as it projected pictures of Jadeite, Mareki, and Umbra into the air in rapid succession. "Then how do you explain them? They managed to cross just fine!"

Kunzite inclined his head in a placating gesture. "Queen Beryl, they could not have done so under their own power. I have gone through the records, and all of these individuals were in Eternal Sleep at the time."

Beryl hummed. "That senshi brat is freeing those I punished? Unacceptable! Still, there may be a way to use this to our advantage. Yes." She stared directly at Kunzite. "So it is guidance you need? Would a beacon do?"

Kunzite was confident enough in his position to remain quiet for a moment while he considered the idea. "Yes, I could work with that."

"Good. Then let me prepare some bait for that filthy little scavenger." In her crystal ball, the faces of several youma appeared. "Now which of these traitors that Nephrite discovered should I put into Eternal Sleep..."

The white-haired general dared interrupt his ruler's train of thought. "In light of the new information, have you considered the possibility that there may not be a conspiracy at all? Mercury's associates were hardly in a position to resist her call."

Beryl waved her long fingers in a dismissive gesture downwards. "Nephrite discovered them in the act of conspiring. Whatever their goal, it means they were going against my will. That is reason enough to punish them. Don't you agree, Kunzite?"

He crossed his arms and wisely kept his opinion to himself. "If I may, our enemy may not go for the bait. If she is really going after Eternal Sleep prisoners to bolster her forces, then she does have an ample selection to chose from."

"That is an excellent point," Queen Beryl agreed. "I should use more bait. Bring me *all* of the accused!"

In the privacy of her bedroom, Ami twirled around her own axis in front of a wall mirror, watching as quicksilver-like flames caressed her body and solidified into a variation of the reaper outfit. With a critical eye, she surveyed the results of her experimentation and giggled. Perfect! Now to find Jadeite and- Ami froze when something green flashed within her veins, and her head felt suddenly much clearer. She blinked at her reflection, and poked the small metal bra she was wearing experimentally. No, no, no, that was a terrible idea!

With a suddenly sober mind and a blossoming blush, she wondered what she had been thinking. The memories of her train of thought weren't hard to call up, and her blush grew to encompass her whole body. Right. Alcohol also lowers inhibitions. Good to know. Now if she only remembered why she had been spending time modifying the reaper's equipment-generating spell, rather than just using her fabrication spell to make an outfit that showed more skin. For some reason, it had seemed like a good idea at the time. Ami decided to consider her questionable choice of project as a blessing. It had at least occupied her long enough to sober up before the artificial boldness bestowed by the alcohol could convince her to go out in public like this, or do something extremely mortifying. So improper! It had been a close thing, too, she remembered as she stepped over the previous experimental result on the ground. Technically, the discarded outfit had already provided support for the chest area, but the chains had neither been comfortable nor provided much modesty. Ami shrugged and seated herself at her desk. She had better write down how she managed this version before the memories disappeared completely in the ale-induced haze. Maybe Cathy could get some use out of this version of the spell, at least. Ami had just finished changing back into her black sailor uniform - her Keeper outfit had been lost to dragonfire when the beast had incinerated her sleeping quarters on the way to the dungeon heart - when the bracelet on her desk glowed softly and chimed like a bell. "Shabon Spray!"

Usagi blinked when Sailor Mercury disappeared from the vision in the sacred fire as soon as she had appeared, leaving an empty and mostly bare room behind.

"Did she look more skittish than usual to you?" Makoto whispered, leaning down toward the blonde with the two long pigtails.

Usagi nodded enthusiastically, but her eyes were still on Ami's room. That was an odd costume lying on her bed, she thought, wondering what she could possibly use it for. That metal had to be cold in uncomfortable places. A moment later, the blonde was distracted when Ami returned with a crystal ball in her hand and rubbing the back of her head sheepishly. To Usagi's right, Luna

hissed as she spotted her missing soldier's new colour scheme, and her hair stood on end. The cat bounded away, and soon, Usagi could hear the furious sound of paws slamming down on a typewriter. Well, that certainly didn't look good, but she'd trust her friend to know what she was doing. Smiling, Usagi waved at Ami's transparent image in the flame and was rewarded when the blue-haired girl looked relieved and waved back. Meanwhile, Makoto raised the first of the sheets holding their questions.

"...and then Mom grounded me because all my clothes were sooty and smelled of fire."

Ami's lips curved upwards as she finished reading Usagi's account of their fight against Nephrite and Zoisite. She was slowly communicating recent events to her friends. The admission that she had almost unleashed Metallia by accident had gone over surprisingly well. Makoto and Usagi had paled when they read her battle report, and then congratulated her for making it out of that dangerous situation alive and unscathed. Only Luna paced worriedly around in a circle, tail pointing straight into the air. When Ami added that her outfit had changed because Metallia empowered her as a reward, the poor moon cat fell over in shock.

Usagi, however, took the news in stride. *"Cool! What can you do now?"*

That was a good question that Ami would have to discuss with Jadeite, and soon. She felt oddly pleased by the prospect. For now though, she enjoyed her time chatting with her friends. She could do nothing about Wemos before her imps and rats had managed to reclaim the roads she had extended toward his territory and which had been lost when she was forced to disconnect the dungeon heart, so she had some time to rest and prepare her next steps. The first priority, she already knew, would be moving her dungeon heart to the mainland somehow, and then she would have to deal with the giant dragon carcass.

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Temple Breached

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"The troops are as ready as they can possibly be," Cathy reported, her hair waving horizontally in the storm like a golden banner.

Ami narrowed her eyes because of the sleet spraying into her face and looked past the blonde, out into the churning sea and to the dark cliffs of the Avatar islands. Even with the fiery red clouds of her predecessor displaced by the sheet lightning of her tempest, the continent looked only slightly less foreboding than before. Distant lightning reflected off black metal carapace as reaper automatons emerged from behind a towering ice spike, making crunching noises with each step as they approached.

"We don't expect problems with vampires during the transfer over the ocean," Cathy added as she followed Mercury's gaze. "There aren't enough ghosts in the immediate vicinity to mass up into dangerous quantities, either." Her smile became vicious. "Your new hireling is doing his work with frightening enthusiasm. Likewise, the reaperbots and patrolling warlocks should be able to handle any enemy forces that might teleport in."

"I'm most concerned about taking spell damage from enemy Keepers," Ami said, "but we should have at least some warning due to my computer, and Jadeite stands ready to negate any structural damage, should it become necessary." She looked down at the ice underneath her feet, which lit up and dimmed in concert with a slow and regular heartbeat that rumbled deep below. "All right! Let's get the dungeon heart to its new position!"

Cathy nodded and put her helmet on as she turned around, unhampered by the sleek black armour she was wearing. The design mirrored Ami's own, and with its black lacquer and rib-like protrusions, it showed an unmistakable family resemblance to the reaperbots. In performance though, it was much closer to the model the young Keeper had used during the Azzathra-sponsored duel

than to the huge robots. The power requirements were commensurately higher, necessitating its fuel to be carried as sapphires, rather than gold. Due to the miniature treasure chamber Ami had built into the suits, they could gradually convert the gems into many times their weight in gold, which in turn sated the enchantments' hunger. To her disappointment, using the technology to make an army of higher-powered bots had turned out a pipe dream. Even if she had the gems to spare, she wouldn't be able to use these creations to attack, since the treasure chamber-derived designs just stopped working when out of contact with the dungeon for too long. For Ami herself, this was not a problem, since she was a mobile piece of her own territory. Cathy, however, would be in trouble if she left the dungeon for more than a few minutes.

Ami had no intention to use the swordswoman on the front lines if it could be avoided, so she did not consider that limitation too daunting. With a smile, she spread her arms, and the flank of her iceberg facing the continent started to change. She enjoyed building with her Keeper powers much more than unleashing destruction. A bulge appeared in its side, and whenever the foam-tipped waves breaking against the massive wall of ice retreated, they left behind an additional layer of ice, helping the protrusion grow. Puffs of blue light rose up from its wet surface as the imps within laboured at a breakneck speed to claim it as new territory before the next waves washed over it. Under Ami's control, a dam-like foundation was growing, acting as support for the massive, glittering arches that held up the bridge she was building. She saw Cathy shout something, and a few of the scythe-wielding automatons stepped from the deck onto the first section of the construction. The bridge continued growing, sloping down slightly toward the shore, which was still almost a kilometre away.

Cathy watched the tall black figures become smaller in the distance as they marched down the wide structure. "Can you really afford to spend so much on a bridge just to move the dungeon heart?"

Ami shook her head. "This costs me almost nothing. I'm using the seawater as raw material, not creating new matter from gold, and ice magic has always come easily to me. I also don't have to build this to last."

"Oh, that's good. It would be a shame if you had nothing left over to recreate our rooms. I'm already missing the hot water." She let her teeth chatter for emphasis.

Ami covered her mouth with her right hand and laughed. "I think the climate will be much more to your liking when I remodel the corruption effects. Since we are on land now, the storm has to go. The environment won't be able to recover as long as it's going on."

"But your windmills?"

"They are above ground and therefore a liability. If I change to a lava-based effect, I should be able to power the generators with steam instead. As a side effect, we should have as much warm water as you like. I could even add a heated swimming pool."

"Ohhh. I can't wait!"

"Torian here," a male voice called in Ami's mind, and the amusement disappeared from her features. Her mental perspective shifted to look at the warlock seated on a stone bench between two polished granite columns decorated with frost patterns. A cloudy glow from the rectangular pool at his feet illuminated his stubbly chin. *"Wemos' forces are about to breach the temple gate.*

With an eardrum-splitting bang, the vampire-propelled ram struck the massive vault door and bent it further inwards. The gate's tortured metal, already concave from the repeated previous impacts, groaned as it tore lose from its bracing and toppled into the room behind it. To the watching vampire Wemos, its slow descent, cushioned by the pressure of the ghosts behind it, couldn't finish fast enough. He was almost drooling in anticipation of the troops and powerful objects he would get out of this endeavour, which would boost him in power enough to weather the retribution that the Underworld cities would attempt to visit upon him. Zarekos was a pathetic fool, too cowardly to seize the opportunities he had, and too chained down to this continent with his many dungeon hearts. Not so him! He would use his new-found armies to swarm through the portals into the Underworld, sack a few cities before they could form

a proper response, and then create a new heart in a secret location. What did he care if this one was lost? He would be back from banishment before his new one could be found! Keeper Mercury was welcome to this worthless wasteland if she wanted it, he thought magnanimously. After all, when she destroyed the former Lord of this realm, she had created this opportunity for him to step out of Zarekos' overbearing shadow and show off his true brilliance.

A vampire left the black or red-clad semicircle of robed beings surrounding the opening, which howled with the haunting voices of the spectres, and turned to face Wemos. "Keeper! There's someth-" With a loud smack, the pale creature who had spoken up flew backwards and crashed into the wall, right next to the open gate from which white, glowing matter was oozing out.

"Call me Emperor, you fool!" Wemos shouted, slapping the speaker remotely a second time as soon as the victim in question had lifted himself back to his knees. "Now get back to dominating the ghosts and having them lower the bridge!"

With his face hidden behind the high collar of his cloak, the struck vampire dared glaring back at his master. "That was what I was talking about! It's not working!"

"WHAT? That's nonsense, there's no way for simple wraiths to-" A tide of ghosts oozed forth from the opening, moving more like a mass of viscous, white-glowing syrup than a swarm of half-rotten, floating faces surrounded by a pale nimbus. The hands reaching out from the densely-packed conglomeration of moaning spectres swiped at the waiting vampires, bony claws glistening with ghostly viscerae. The dark-robed bloodsuckers drifted away from the blows like fog on a breeze, more confused than threatened. Wemos' eyes flared crimson as he, too, attempted to assert his will over the undead horde and found its grip slide off their feeble minds. Livid, he bellowed with rage. The ghosts' disobedience could only mean one thing: someone had gotten into the temple before him and enslaved them already! How could this have happened, and why didn't the occupants tear the intruder to shreds? This was completely unacceptable! It also made his current strategic situation quite precarious.

"Kee- Emperor, the ghosts are pulling back!"

"I can see that!" Wemos snarled at his sycophantic underling. With great effort, he attempted to reign in his temper, but then slapped her anyway since she wasn't worth the trouble. The brow of his borrowed body furrowed as the ghosts flattened themselves against each other, their mass parting to form a narrow passage that started at the ram. Over their moans and screeches, he could hear the rattling of thick chains as the drawbridge was lowered, bridging the water-filled channel that prevented him and his brethren from simply teleporting in. The gesture could be nothing but an invitation. Without thinking twice, Wemos rose from the ground, floating on a cloud of grey fog that swirled around his feet. He felt no concern for his safety as he darted toward the opening and through the cordon of ghosts, propelled by the anger he was feeling in the back of his mind. He wasn't risking his own body, and even his host would revive in his coffin if something happened to him. Soon, soon he would confront the fool who had dared take what was rightfully his!

The vampire Keeper easily manoeuvred through the thin space the ghosts had left free for him. He entirely ignored the skeletons milling about the floor of the octagonal chamber, which was more of a hollow subterranean tower than anything else. Even if he could have seen its smoothed and polished walls through the dense clouds of semi-transparent ghosts, he would have ignored them. Just like the other vampires, he had been forced to toil and work here for endless hours over the years, etching elaborate inlays and frescoes into the stone. If he never saw them again, it would still be too soon. Sudden motion before him drew his attention. The pathway through the ghosts tapered and closed before him. A lesser being than him might have been intimidated by the stare of hundreds of hostile faces with sunken eyes, but he was merely irritated and put his arms akimbo, returning their gaze without flinching. He wouldn't be shaken by any mind games the thief who had taken control of this place wanted to play with him! The vampire and ghosts remained frozen and unmoving like the dead things they were, neither side willing to show weakness. It took Wemos almost a minute to realise that the shimmering spectres weren't blocking his path, but that he had merely reached a bend in the route they had selected for him. Above him, a spirit-free area lead up for a long way, almost to the

ceiling of the twenty-five story high room. Gritting his teeth in anger at having made himself look like a simpleton, the vampire shot upwards, past the many struts stabilising the cavernous chamber. Everlasting incense burners hung from these supports, the flames inside illuminating the ridiculously tall monument to Zarekos' pride alongside which Wemos was ascending. *As if the glow from all those ghosts wasn't more than enough to shed light on his foolish statue.*

About three-fourths of the way up, the irritated vampire flew through the gap in between the cupped hands of the enormous sculpture, each of whose fingers were larger than himself. From this point on, the ghost density in the air gradually diminished. When he was level with the shiny marble of the statue's forehead, there was no longer anything blocking his line of sight or his view of the pentagram graven into the statue's brow. A figure floated right in the centre of the design, with its back to him.

Silently, Wemos drifted closer, considering whether a swift surprise attack would be enough to get rid of this unexpected rival. His features were calm and unmoving, masking the simmering rage he felt. It threatened to boil over once he recognised the red cloak the intruder was wearing. The Avatar's mantle! It should rightfully be *his*! A moment later, the vampire's fury abated and a subdued smirk appeared on his bloodless lips. His host had to be insane to be wearing it when there was no need, or was at least unaware of the dangers. Either way, it looked as if his problem would soon resolve itself. Feeling quite a bit more cheerful than before, he called out "If you go through the trouble of inviting me in, you should at least be polite enough to not let me wait!"

"How impatient." With a rustle of heavy cloth, the floating figure turned around, revealing a transparent body behind the mantle.

Wemos gaped. A ghost, lucid and powerful enough to control the others? This was unheard of! He involuntarily took a closer look and met the creature's eyes, not recognising the trap until it was too late. A familiar and unwanted influence seeped into his mind, filling a void that he had been unaware of. An echo of this power within his own blood responded to the foreign touch, squashing even the possibility of rebellious thoughts. "M-Master?"

The ghost of Zarekos, looking disturbingly unfamiliar without the red light shining in his eyes, laughed. "Yes, Wemos. Surprised to see me yet survive?"

"How is this possible? You died! You have no dungeon hearts!" Wemos' voice became shriller and shriller as he processed what he was seeing. "How can you be a ghost? You were a vampire already! You should be gone!"

"Preparations, plans and plots, perfected and performed with precision," Zarekos stated, his cold voice reverberating through the tower. "I have discarded the destiny of all that lives and defeated death itself, and divinity is my destination! You, imbecile and ingrate though you may be, shall be instrumental to implementing my next proper incarnation. Now listen to my orders and obey!"

Ami watched the thick, straight bridge she had constructed. Calling the structure a bridge was perhaps giving it too much credit, since it implied a degree of architectural finesse that simply wasn't present. The construct was nothing more than a massive tube of solid ice, held aloft by smooth, organic-looking pillars that reached like pincers out of the ocean. In regular intervals, the bridge's middle pulsed with faint bluish light that was visible for a long way in the night. The glow originated from her dungeon heart, which she was slowly moving toward the mainland. Having it out in the open like that was rather nerve-wracking, and she'd be glad once it reached the shore and she could burrow it properly within the solid ground. Of course, once there, it would be moving much slower through the ground than it was currently sliding through the ice. This was the main reason why Ami hadn't simply performed the entire transfer underneath the sea. The bridge shaved off almost an entire day from the slow relocation process. That was one day earlier that she could focus on defeating the final Keeper. *I should be happy I got the dungeon heart to move at all,* she thought, *it's not as if it was meant to.*

With a tired sigh, she blew her bangs out of her face and resumed sliding the room forward. 'Sliding' was not really what she was doing, since to slide something forward, it couldn't be part of the surface it was sliding on. Neither was the artefact swimming or drifting. She

was basically reconstructing its surroundings on the fly, ripping the walls in front of it open like a curtain and moving its matter around the dungeon heart until it was behind the artefact and pushed it forward centimetre by centimetre. It was slow, arduous work, but necessary in order to prevent breaking the connection between the dungeon heart and its territory. If she did that, her claimed regions on the continent would disappear once again, delaying her offensive against Wemos even more. Additionally, she didn't have a faster way to move the heavy thing anyway, and the time she spent on this wasn't entirely lost. While she was moving the heart, her rats were hopping over the surface toward the centre of the enemy Keeper's land, turning the ground underneath their dancing paws into tiled roads belonging to Ami's territory. Her employees weren't idle either and working without her supervision to butcher the giant carcass of the dragon. She was grateful for the coldness of her iceberg, which kept the mountain of flesh refrigerated, and for the fact that the bloody and disgusting work didn't require her personal oversight. She didn't want to imagine what it would smell like once the corpse started decomposing. There had been one unforeseen complication, though.

"Stop. It's no use! It won't budge!" the three purple-clad warlocks standing around the dark temple's pool lowered their arms, panting and letting the motes of power surrounding their staves dissipate. The dragon's limb, stuck within the depths of the shimmering liquid, hadn't moved upwards a hair's width, even with the combined power of three levitation tugging at it. The magicians looked unhappily at the emerald and blue scales that seemed to mock their efforts with their glitter.

"I suppose we'll just have to cut it off and make sure no more falls in," one of them said.

"Difficult. The flesh is rather tough. How close to the surface can we cut it off to minimise waste?"

"Well, I certainly don't want to get close enough to that water to risk touching it," the third said. "Maybe we should cut about here?" He reached out and touched the dead tissue with his index finger,

making a glowing line circle the dragon's limb at around hip height. "Well, what do you think?" Someone bumped into him from behind, and he pushed back without looking. "Stop crowding me," he grunted. "Morons."

A gust of damp, hot air shot down on his neck, and he suddenly felt his hackles rise. Slowly, he raised his head until the face towering over him appeared upside-down in his field of view. He saw teeth. Many, many, finger-long and spike-like teeth. And a nose ring and red skin. With a girlish "Eeep," he ducked, lifted up his robe and darted away, almost soiling himself when he heard a scythe whistle through the air behind him. Blood splashed, and he opened his eyes, surprised to be still alive. When he turned around, he saw the demon hold a piece of dragon flesh in his hand like a melon slice, and move it toward his maw.

The warlock then proceeded to demonstrate that being highly intelligent did not necessarily imply being wise. He pointed at the chunk of meat. "H-hey, that's valuable!"

The reaper slowly turned his head into the dark mage's direction and stared at him with pupil-less white eyes. Bones cracked between his fangs as he bit it straight through them.

"I-I suppose we don't need that piece- EEEP!" The warlock sprinted off as fast as his gangly legs could carry him when the horned beast took a step toward him, scythe raised threateningly. His co-workers had already fled at the first sight of the monster.

Ami was now faced with a situation she didn't entirely like. Rabixtrel was in the temple, praying, or at least howling at the ceiling in a disturbing way. He didn't seem to care that the temple was consecrated to a dark deity he knew nothing about. Neither did the warlocks who felt inspired to follow his example. Hey, a god that was beneficial enough for a Keeper this smart was *obviously* good enough for them. The greater problem was that she did not want to see the demon's reaction if he returned from a hunting trip and did not find the building. Since he was a reaper, it was bound to be murderous rage. She wouldn't have hesitated to tear down the

temple anyway if her scans had given her even the slightest indication that Metallia could derive life energy from their worship. There was no sign of energy drain, though. In fact, the worshippers left the place calmer and in a better-rested state than before. Ami shrugged and returned to her work. She would leave them be for the moment and keep an eye on things. Oh, and add a safety railing to the basin, just in case any goblins showed up, too.

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Allies?

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"Our Great Ruler spoke to you directly and gave you her blessings? That's wonderful progress!" Jadeite was sitting on a stone desk of a darker tone than his grey uniform, and beamed at Mercury.

Even though the rare sight of a genuine smile on his face made Ami's heart flutter, she couldn't properly share his enthusiasm. Her black-gloved hands tugged at both ends of her jagged chest ribbon in a futile attempt to straighten it. "Jadeite, I'm not happy about this."

The curly-haired blond raised an eyebrow as he took a closer look at the blue-haired girl, who was hanging her head. "Why? It means you are in her good graces and that we are one step closer to cutting Beryl off from her support. What's the problem here?"

"I find it terrifying that she is already so lucid! I'm scared that she'll wake up completely and destroy my world!"

"She was always going to wake up at some point in the future. You shouldn't worry so much about something you can't change," Jadeite said, his voice not particularly concerned.

"That's easy for you to say! Nothing you care about is in danger!" Ami accused, sounding both sad and angry.

Scowling, Jadeite's mouth opened, but he closed it without saying a word when he met Ami's eyes. He took a deep breath, and his expression softened. "Fine. All right. I may not have as much at stake as you do, but that doesn't change the facts. We cannot stand against Queen Metallia, and the only way to protect your friends is having her favour."

His words did nothing to cheer Ami up. She rested her head on her left hand and let out a heartfelt sigh. She didn't notice Jadeite approach before his white-gloved hand covered her right, which remained lying on the fine-grained wood of the table before her.

Startled by the touch, she looked at him through her blue bangs.

"Look, the only thing that could possibly stop her awakening," Jadeite looked as if he had bitten into a lemon as he forced out the near-heretical words, "is doing away with Beryl. You can't do that before you get back, so let's figure out if anything you have gained from the blessing can help, yes? That's why we came here in the first place." He swept his free arm around in a grand gesture, from the blackboard behind him, over the soft mats covering the left half of the spacious chamber, to the wooden targets nailed to the rough granite blocks that formed the back wall.

Ami hesitated for an instant, during which her gaze rested his hand enveloping hers, and she blushed faintly. Filled with new determination, she nodded and got up from behind her desk. The unopened book that had rested before her rose into the air and flew back into the shelf to her right, seemingly on its own.

An orb of dark power impacted the wobbly sphere surrounding Ami, exploding into black flames that unfolded like a flower's petals. As soon as the flash had dissipated, the blue ripples arcing across the curved surface disappeared as the barrier faded back into transparency. Ami was breathing heavily and gritting her teeth. With barely a flicker, the egg-shaped force field disappeared when she let the triangle formed by the tips of her thumbs and her index fingers come apart.

Jadeite put his hands behind his back as he evaluated her performance. "Hmm. You can form a solid shield, but it will require a lot of practice until you can use it reliably in combat. We should see whether you have any more luck with the glamour exercises now."

Without needing to be prompted, Ami walked over to the mats covering the left half of the room, rose a few centimetres into the air, and assumed a cross-legged meditative pose.

"Let's start with something easy. Try to change your own appearance."

Ami complied, and light-devouring distortions flickered through the air surrounding her body, making her outline waver. She closed her eyes to help her concentrate while she tried to control the unfamiliar magic.

Jadeite watched her efforts go nowhere for a good ten minutes before declaring "Stop. You are doing it completely wrong. Don't try to control the magic, that will only distract you. Just focus on the desired end result!"

Ami opened her eyes and let herself drift down onto the mat. "But how am I supposed to do that? I can't just not think about the intermediary steps even if I want to. It doesn't make sense!" For once, the young Keeper's logical mindset was working against her.

"Heh, you probably would have trouble with that way of thinking," the dark general admitted. He stopped pacing up and down. "Hmm. Try it a different way, then. Just let the power flow, with no fixed goal in mind, and see what happens."

"Isn't that dangerous?" Ami asked, a questioning look in her eyes.

"Not for you, and I can protect myself." Nevertheless, Jadeite took a few steps back. "Give it a try."

Ami relaxed her muscles and concentrated. So she just had to gather power and let it go? She focused inward, reaching for her magic. With the mental exercises Jadeite had taught her, it wasn't hard to twist her own power into the dark energy required for casting Dark Kingdom spells. It was so easy, in fact, that she suspected that the dungeon heart was assisting her in some way. Assisted or not, she had always worked with her own magic. Now, however, dark power kept pouring in from somewhere beyond her perception as she reached past her normal limits. It swelled into a roiling torrent that streamed out of her body like a flaring aura. The flow intensified, and dust on the ground fled from her. Even the mats she was sitting on started to rattle when the black tide buffeted them. She could see Jadeite lean forward into the ghostly gale to prevent being blown backwards. Further away, her precious books were falling off the shelves, but she was still feeling the same as before. Was this working now? A mental yank retrieved a hand mirror from her room

and floated it in front of her, allowing her to see whether she was successfully changing her appearance or not. She grimaces at the sight in the reflective oval. She hadn't changed at all, but the dark power emanating from her body wrapped her in deep, black shadows that let only the crimson glare from her eyes escape. With a soft gasp, she reigned in the evil energy and cut off the flow. Once the furniture stopped rattling, she shook her head. "Jadeite, I don't think this is working."

"You got something to happen, at least," the curly-haired man said with a grin and pointed at his feet. With his right boot, he was pinning down the tail of a woolly grey thing that clawed at the ground as it tried to get away.

"Don't hurt- wait, that's not a rat, is it?" Ami looked closer, zooming in with her Keeper sight on the little critter chewing on Jadeite's footwear with pointy teeth. "What *is* that?"

"Looks like an animated dust bunny to me," the dark general said and stepped on the tiny nuisance, squishing it. A puff of grey dust escaped from underneath his soles.

"Hey, I wanted to study tha-"

"Don't worry, there's more."

Ami's gaze followed Jadeite's pointed index finger to the bookshelf, where one of the severe tomes was walking around on four tiny legs. While she stared at it, dumbfounded, movement from the firing range drew her attention. She turned to take a closer look, and blinked. One of the round archery targets blinked back like a giant eye. "Jadeite, what is going on here? What are those strange things?"

"You made them. Or, more precisely, the vast amount of Queen Metallia's power you inundated the room with caused them to arise on their own," Jadeite explained. "There's no reason to worry, it happens all the time in the Dark Kingdom. In fact, many youma use the effect in combination with their glamour powers to produce servants that may perform simple tasks autonomously, though they never last long."

Ami picked up the crawling book and made it hover before her, turning slowly around its own axis. "Are they dangerous?" she asked when she spotted the toothy mouth hidden between the covers.

"No, they are mere nuisances, almost powerless. The luckiest of them may evolve into proper youma over the centuries, though." Jadeite crossed his arms. "It's unfortunate that they are the only thing your magic produced. I had hoped that your stray thoughts would cause you to unintentionally change something in the room into something else, but either your mental discipline is too good, or using glamour just doesn't come easily to you. Sadly, it appears as if this was a waste of effort."

"Maybe not." Ami considered the strange, struggling book. She had already had some success with substituting one source of magic for another, so why not give that method another try? *Time for a little experiment.* Drawing on Metallia's power once more, she funnelled it into the imp creation spell.

Ami stepped through the wavering orange glow between the four megaliths framing her Underworld portal, holding her head high. Tiger's tall body helped her look more imposing, and so did the fact that her feet weren't touching the ground. She would have loved to be wearing armour for this, but since the youma's body was still changing a little whenever Ami possessed her, constructing a suit would have been premature. For now, the dark version of her Sailor Mercury uniform would have to do. She hid her worry behind a mask of cold, arrogant confidence - an expression she had actually practised before the mirror until it stopped sending Jered into a fit of giggles each time he saw it. She swept her stern gaze over the monsters manning the barricades that had appeared around the Underworld-side exit of the portal.

"The Keeper!" a surprised and scratchy voice cried. With a twang, a slender silhouette that could have only belonged to a dark elf loosed a crossbow bolt in her direction and slipped back behind one of the uncountable stalagmites.

Ami suppressed a flinch as the bolt impacted her prepared shield,

remained stuck to the transparent bubble for an instant while green motes sprayed from its shaft, and then dropped limply to the rust-coloured ground. "What is the meaning of this? Explain why you are preventing my minions from getting to the city!" she demanded, acting as if the unprovoked attack had not fazed her at all. In truth, she was uncomfortably certain that the enchanted projectile would have penetrated the shield if she had raised it herself, rather than asking Jadeite to apply it before she left. The drain from the bolt's impact had been something she would have expected from a projectile at least twenty times larger. From different spots within the shadows, a few similar bolts whistled in her direction, and met with the same success as their predecessor. Ami's continued survival seemed to curb the attackers' enthusiasm, and she could hear some frustrated muttering behind the metal-studded palisades as the bombardment died down.

"Warlocks, stand ready to ward off her magic," a voice grunted behind the horizontal logs blocking the tunnels leading away from the portal. "WEMOS! The Cities are coming to make you pay for your transgression! Better kill yourself now before we can get our claws on you!"

"What? You have the wrong dungeon!" Ami shouted in the direction of the voice. Judging by its sound, the speaker was probably an orc. She floated higher into the air to see if she couldn't peek over the barricades and spot him. "Do I look like a vampire to you? I am Sailor Mercury. I am *at war* with Wemos!"

"Doesn't matter. I've got orders! Nobody is leaving through a portal from the Avatar Islands, even if they were Mukrezar himself! Go and slink back into the hole you came from!" the voice barked with the confidence of someone who held his rank for reasons other than his abilities.

Ami blinked at the order, not having expected it. "Now wait a moment! We are all fighting Wemos, so it would make sense to work together! Who's in charge of your operation?" A quick touch to her left earring activated her visor, which immediately detected around fifty heat sources hidden between the dripping rock formations and behind the hastily-erected walls. The speaker seemed to be the largest one. A much smaller one stood very close to his right,

leaning forward as if whispering something to the taller figure. Possibly an aide of some sort.

"Bah, we don't need your help! It's your fault that Zarekos' vampires got off the leash and harassed us! You just had to use some cheap trick to kill him instead of fighting through his forces properly!" came the dismissive reply from behind the blockade.

The smaller dot of warmth seemed to shrug and shake its head before darting away from the larger one. Ami breathed in deeply for another shout. "That would be up to your superiors to decide! Besides, this defensive arrangement," she pointed at the newly-dug, water-filled trench circling the portal, "may be able to stop the vampires cold, but it won't do a thing to keep Wemos' horde of other undead out. Neither," she disappeared with a flash of blue and flashed into existence within arm's reach of the creature she had identified as the leader, "does it stop me!"

The large orc's beady black eyes widened when two burning red slits suddenly appeared out of a swirl of snowflakes, right in front of his face. With a gasp, the pink-skinned humanoid jumped backwards and tripped over his own feet in his haste to get away. His armour clattered loudly as his bulky posterior struck the unyielding ground, and he stared up in horror at the red-eyed figure wreathed in flames of black energy. Shouts of alarm sounded through the camp even as the warding diagrams on the ground burned around the intruder's boots, releasing acrid smoke. His eyes darted to the warlock's shack, searching for arcane help. The sight of the black-frocked magicians stumbling and retching from the magical feedback caused by their collapsing wards only served to further lower his spirit. A callused hand reached for the steel maul at his belt, shaking as its owner remembered the tale of this slender-looking girl defeating a horned reaper in single combat. "B-back! If you harm me, we will c-come after you too! You c-can't handle us!"

"You know who else thought that in the last four days alone? Keepers Zarekos, Morrigan, Arachne, Alphel, and Nero. Guess who's still here?" the terrifying figure standing over him quipped and took a step forward, reaching for him with clawed fingers.

Ami blinked and covered her mouth when the big, scarred orc

passed out and fell on his back. She had only wanted to take his hand to help him get up. Nervously, she looked around the war camp, hoping that his warriors wouldn't draw the wrong conclusions. "Wait! I'm not here to fight!"

Her visor informed her that most of the troops had ducked out of sight, hiding behind barrels and chests, into tents, and inside the dense forest of stalagmites and stalactites that filled the tunnels. It seemed as if every crossbow and bow in the encampment was currently pointed at her. Nevertheless, none of the dark elves, orcs, and trolls dared open fire on her - yet.

"Look, who's in charge here now?" Ami asked again. "All I want is to talk to your superiors. I'm sure we can work things out without bloodshed."

"What did you do to the boss?" A short orc with his helmet sitting askew on his head peeked out of his cover.

"Nothing, he will recover easily enough. Look, just contact your leaders and set up a meeting, okay? I'll leave if you do."

The pink face nodded so quickly that the white hair framing it fell in front of its eyes like a curtain. "Very well." He looked over at the fallen form of the big orc on the floor. "We'll send a letter through the portal when arrangements are made, is that acceptable?"

"I have no objections," Ami said. "Hopefully, we will have this little misunderstanding cleared up quickly." She rose into the air and teleported back to the portal, glad to be out of the line of fire.

As soon as she had left, the smaller orc ran to the side of his captain and prodded his side with a foot experimentally. When this failed to rouse the much larger creature, he rubbed his hands, grinned, and rushed off toward his master's tent. He had to compose a letter, and if he remembered right, his fearless leader kept his booze in the same chest as the ink.

"...and that's the current situation," Ami explained to her advisers,

who were currently assembled around a round table in one of the new rooms of her dungeon. A large crystal ball rested before her, showing the outpost she had just left. She was paying attention to the messenger approaching the portal, since she wanted to track him to the main camp of the Cities' army.

Jered moved his fingers across the entries in his ledger. "Hmm. We have enough food to last us another day, which means the troops will have to fast for a day before the new farms will provide their first harvest. From the supply point of view, this little blockade is irksome, but not threatening."

"Are you sure they won't try to pull a fast one on you if they invite you to a meeting?" Cathy asked, more worried about the immediate tactical implications.

"Why would they? My cooperation can only be to their advantage. They'll take less losses and have an easier time getting at Wemos!" Ami said, not taking her eyes off the scrying device.

"I suppose more troops would be good, now that he's reinforcing his defences with ghosts from the temple," the swordswoman conceded.

"I emphatically advise against allowing them to set foot onto the continent," Nurgil said in a dead-sounding tone of voice. "While punishing Wemos is their main objective, a large army such as theirs will not shy away from plundering targets of opportunity, such as your dungeon. Distance is no protection, since their maps will tell them to which set of destinations each portal in the area connects. They only need a few teleport-capable magic users to repair a nearby one. Afterwards, they can be right on top of us in an instant. What slows them down right now is not travel time, but the logistical problem of integrating proud troops from many different communities into a single command structure."

"Ah, there's the main camp!" Ami interrupted. "That's a lot of soldiers," she commented as the crystal ball showed her rows upon rows of tents filling a vast grotto. Some were made of leather, others of cloth, wood, or bone, and barely any resembled each other. As mismatched as the habitations were the different monsters mingling

in the camp. She spotted trolls, orcs, bile demons, dark elves, armoured humans, and even two small dragons. Some of the species were unknown to her, and she instructed her computer to record them so that she could look them up later. With interest, she noticed pens and cages holding giant spiders and other monsters that could be unleashed as shock troops and cannon fodder. One particular anomaly drew her attention almost magnetically "What is that?" Ami pointed at a large, black cube with gilded edges that was being transported on a cart drawn by twelve manacled goblins, whose backs were marred with whip marks. An intricate, meandering symbol glowed on the object's top face, resembling a spiral as well as a beetle. Ami could almost make out some hidden meaning within the convoluted pattern of narrow lines. They spelled out something important, she was sure.

The pale vampire glanced at the crystal ball at Mercury's question, and quickly averted his eyes. "The sigil of the Unraveller. You shouldn't look at it for too long or you might lose your mind."

With effort, Ami pulled her gaze away from the fascinating design. "The Unraveller?"

"The Unraveller of Mysteries, yes. One of the Dark Gods. She takes a dim view of Keepers who violate their role in the great scheme of things and take up arms against the Underworld. I am not surprised that she provided a gift to the avenging forces."

"What kind of gift?" Cathy asked.

Nurgil shrugged. "It is a mystery. If I was in charge of this army, however, I would have asked for an alternate route to the Avatar Islands, just in case Wemos and his minions managed to render all portals unusable."

"That makes sense." Ami turned to Marda, who had been following the conversation with a rather bored expression on her face. "What would you advise?"

"Work with the Underworlders. Their forces will be useful, not only to beat Wemos, but also to spread your fame, which should make future recruitment that much easier. If they *do* betray you, just show

them the dead dragon to make them rethink their poor decision. With their goal already accomplished, they will be looking for quick profit only. Their troops won't have the stomach for a protracted siege." The armoured troll kept staring into Nurgil's unmoving eyes the whole time as she challenged the vampire's point of view.

"I will not reiterate my reasons against this course of action," the undead answered, addressing Mercury. "Instead, I suggest that you attack and wipe out Keeper Wemos before the Cities get properly organised. The rank and file of their forces does not desire a fight, since there is not much loot to be expected from a purely punitive expedition, especially here. Should you defeat Wemos before their army takes action, it will dwindle into nothing on its own. With their goal already accomplished, the leaders of the various factions will not violate their contractual obligations by withdraw their expensive support."

Ami sighed inwardly as she pondered her choices. With her two advisers who knew most about this region suggesting contradictory approaches, the final decision would rest entirely on her shoulders.

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Assault on Wemos

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Cathy frowned as she waved a letter written on brown parchment around. The resulting air currents disturbed the fog swirling underneath the room's high ceiling. "The nerve! They are practically ordering you around! Who do they think they are?"

Ami looked up from the map lying on the marble table in front of her and backed away when the irate blonde thrust the message underneath her nose. "I have read it too, Cathy. Please sit down again."

"Hrrm." The swordswoman's chair scraped over the white-blue-tiled floor as she complied. Jered, sitting to her right, snatched the letter from the leaders of the cities' retributive army out of her fingers and had a look at it.

The weasel-featured man briefly skimmed its contents. "Their leaders would be the strongest, most vicious thugs of each respective city. They have more in common with gang leaders than with our nobles. A certain lack of diplomatic skill is to be expected." He finished scanning the letter. "Nevertheless, I think it's clear that they are not interested in cooperation."

At the head of the long, rectangular table, Ami nodded. Her other advisers seated along its length looked at her with curious expressions. "To paraphrase: if you want to be useful, repair the indicated portals and stay out of our way. Wemos belongs to us," she summarised for their benefit. "They do not mention a possible meeting to discuss our relative positions in any way."

"Unsurprising," Torian, representing the warlocks after his predecessor Erasmus died during the Nero debacle, said slowly. His spindly, ring-encrusted fingers moved slowly over the white-glowing crystal ball that illuminated his beard stubble from below. "They must be shaking in their boots at the thought of being within your illustrious presence, my Lady. Even their dark angel would not like

his chances against someone who has defeated a horned reaper in single combat."

Ami acknowledged the flattery with an almost imperceptible nod. "In any case, I have thought about our options, and decided that Nurgil is correct. We must defeat Wemos before the allied cities can make their move."

The large bat hanging upside down from a brass bird perch flapped its wings to show its approval. Due to the pool hidden underneath the floor, Nurgil had to remain in one of his semi-living forms that was able to exist above the body of water. Marda shifted her weight forward in her seat, making her armour creak as she shot a dark look at the vampire. It was the only outright negative reaction to Ami's statement that the young Keeper could see, although there were a few sceptical looks. Given recent events, she was loathe to let even more forces she couldn't control onto the continent, but that wasn't the main reason why she had chosen to follow the vampire's advice instead of Marda's. The militia soldiers were alive, while her own remote-controlled forces were not, and many would die if they confronted Wemos on his own turf. If she could, she would rather avoid unnecessary bloodshed whenever possible. However, the strongest reason against working together with the coalition of Underworld cities was that they endangered her own goals. She needed Zarekos' temple intact if she wanted to learn its secrets. The power to protect her territory from enemy scrying alone would be invaluable, and anything else she found out on top would be a welcome bonus. Then, there was the missing vial of her blood she had to worry about.. She had no doubt that the city forces would at least pillage the building, if not outright tear it down if they got there first. It was something she simply couldn't afford to let happen.

Snyder craned his neck to see past Jadeite, who was sitting to his right, and said "Well, that is quite the problem statement. Do we have sufficient forces to succeed within the imposed time constraints? The number of ghosts within the structure is daunting, to say the least."

"I'm confident we can do it," Ami said, and a faint smile played around her lips. "I have recently regained the use of one of my old abilities." She stood up and raised her right hand. A shadow dripped

from her fingers, expanded into a black bubble that landed on the table with a soft thump, and shed motes of darkness until only a small, somewhat familiar form remained. As the remaining darkness bled away, a mutter went through the room. Huge black eyes stared back at the surprised faces from underneath a candle-topped miner's helmet.

"You can make imps again?" Jered commented, leaning forward to take a closer look. "Hmm, there's something off about it."

With an angry squeak, the little creature turned to face him and waved its pick. Or, more precisely, her pick, if the two lumps underneath the blue overall were any indication.

"It's even uglier than the regular imps," Marda snarled. An instant later, she had to lean her head to the side as the imp's pick whistled through the air, nearly grazing the armoured troll's cheek. "Worse-tempered, too. Is there a specific reason you made it female?"

The imp blew a raspberry at the broad-nosed troll leader and hopped off the table to fetch her digging implement, stowed it away in her backpack, and raced off into one of the tunnels.

"It's an unintentional side effect," Ami explained. "The dark energy I use to fuel the imp creation seems to prefer some forms over others, and I am still experimenting with the right mixture. Too much regular magic, and the imp doesn't come alive. Too little, and the result dissipates into random effects. The current balance I found comes with little quirks, but is otherwise stable."

"Does this mean we will be seeing your ice golems again?" Jered asked with a lecherous grin. A clanging noise echoed through the room as Cathy's elbow slammed into his breastplate.

Ami nodded. "I already embedded the required spell matrix within the dungeon heart. However, due to its inability to work with mana directly, I am suffering from efficiency issues. Current calculations show that I won't be able to maintain more than twenty-five percent of the original number without exhausting myself rapidly."

"That's still better than nothing," Cathy said. Her expression

suddenly brightened. "Hey, since you can bring the imps alive, what about the dungeon hearts?"

To the blonde's surprise, Ami paled. "That's a very bad idea. It would be like trying to get myself possessed by an imp spirit."

"All right then, forget I asked."

"Let's move on to planning the attack." Ami produced her computer. "Jadeite, the maps please?"

The dark general snapped his white-gloved fingers, and the lights overhead went out. A reproduction of the terrain surrounding Wemos' territory grew from the marble, glowing from within and illuminating the faces of the people seated around the table from below. In places, the illusionary surface was transparent, revealing a network of tunnels and chambers coloured in red underneath. The tendrils of aquamarine that denoted Mercury's claimed territory had not yet reached the enemy Keeper's zone of control, but it was clear to everyone watching the map that the skirmishing would start soon.

"Thank you. Marda, what is your assessment?"

The troll grunted and took almost a full minute to study the terrain features. "The problems we are facing are quite similar to the original invasion, except smaller in magnitude. Since Wemos sacked a city, we may additionally have to contend with enemy spells." She looked up at Mercury. "We must engage the enemy in narrow locations where he cannot bring his numerical superiority to bear. This battle will be decided underground."

"I agree with that assessment," Cathy chimed in. "Our reaperbots are much stronger than the ghosts and skeletons. The main problem will be the vampires."

"Of course, Wemos will probably instruct his imps and ghosts to dig wide, spacious halls to prevent just that," Jered pointed out.

"How are the gold reserves, my Lady? Can you clear such obstacles with your fearsome magic?" Torian asked, almost drooling at the thought of getting to watch mysterious and powerful spells in action.

"I advise against that," Marda interrupted sharply. "You will need your gold to construct water-filled obstacles to limit vampire mobility. As long as they are able to teleport around freely, your imps will be unable to work their way deeper into enemy territory."

"Noted," Ami said. A few blue markers in the shape of caricatured reaper bots appeared on the map and slid into position. "As you can see here, my plan is to..."

Tormented howls of utter agony, amplified by the concave walls of the underground tower, competed with the ceaseless wailing of the ghosts in Zarekos' temple. Zarekos, with his ghostly left hand buried within the back of Wemos' skull, directed a cold gaze at the line of forty-one vampires floating like blotches of dark ink above the milky glow from below. One of the spectres supporting the unfortunate vampiric Keeper forced its way into his gaping mouth, slid down his throat, and wrapped around his strained vocal chords. His screams died down as his neck bulged and swelled to grotesque proportions, allowing Zarekos to address his slaves without having to shout. His acidic mental voice reverberated through the brains of his minions. *"For want of wisdom, wretched Wemos enraged the Underworld. If only he existed in more than one body a so that I might properly prolong his punishment!"* The ghost's glare intensified as he snarled at his audience, while his red mantle oozed around him like a bleeding wound. *"Your cooperation in this catastrophic endeavour he concocted is noted."*

The assembled vampires gulped, shaking as they gazed up upon the macabre ruin that was their Keeper's twitching, undead body.

Unfortunately for Zarekos, the demands of the situation and his current disembodied state kept him from properly expressing what he thought of their conduct. Using Wemos as a hollowed-out hand puppet was not how he intended to spend the rest of eternity, so acquiring a new body was the first priority on his agenda. He already knew how to properly motivate his worthless spawn. *"I shall forgive you for this failure - one of you! Only the first who finishes my following quest shall be spared my wrath! Fetch me a fertile female! A dangerous dragon damsel is what I desire, but they are in sadly*

short supply. An elegant elf is what I expect, a humble human the most modest maiden I shall accept."

"But Master, what about the army from the Underworld that is assembling?" one of the braver bloodsuckers dared ask.

"Some select soldiers should comply with my criteria," the self-styled emperor replied, misinterpreting the question on purpose. *"That aside, it is of little concern to me."* At the end of his arm, a pained gargle forced its way through Wemos' de-fanged gums as the faint red glow in the Keeper's eyes brightened. *"Insolent imps intruding on my dark domain, however, call for callous and cruel corrective action. Begone! Slay the servants of the Keeper who boldly besieges this place of profane power!"*

Ami's heart was beating rapidly as a final layer of rock and earth crumbled away under the picks of her imps, revealing a wall. A rust-red mural in the shape of a stylized demonic grimace leered at the little workers, illuminated by the small lanterns on their helmets. Further back in the narrow, arrow-straight tunnel, more of the imps fortified the walls and claimed the floor. Ami hadn't paid to extend her electric cables into these remote corridors that would soon be heavily contested, and so her siege tunnels were lit by the standard torches also found in other dungeons. The passages still managed to look somewhat brighter and less oppressive than other dungeons by virtue of their ivory-white and clean blue tones. While the imps worked, three reaper automatons landed behind them, each of them tall and wide enough to block the passage on its own.

"That was the last one. The automatons are in place, the imps stand ready, and the forward bunkers are constructed. Is everyone else ready, too?" Ami turned in place, taking in the determined nods of the warlocks sitting in front of their scrying screens, the salutes of the troll contingent standing in the back of the room, and Jadeite's eager smirk as he stood in front of the command chair with crossed arms. The faint hum of magical shields could be heard around the room, and the alarm wards shone with green light. Only one person stood out from the atmosphere of quiet confidence. "Snyder? Is something wrong? What are you so nervous about?"

"Ah, well," the redhead ducked his head at being singled out, "I am simply worrying about the terrible spell Keeper Nero deployed against us. The possibility that Wemos has knowledge of it too is extremely unpleasant to consider."

"Oh, that," Ami gave him a reassuring smile. "Don't worry. I had a long look at the recovered remains of Nero's spellbook, and Wemos' dungeon heart is definitely not close enough for that." She looked around. "Does anyone else have any last-minute concerns? No? Good. Begin!" The teenager in the black senshi uniform disappeared into a a miniature whirlwind of snowflakes, only to shimmer into existence hundreds of kilometres away. The complete darkness within one of her six forward bunkers was no impediment to her Keeper sight, but the bare interior of the shell of steel submerged within a small pool of water could not keep her interest. Since she was now close enough to the front line to force spells into enemy territory, she spread her arms and channelled energy through her dungeon heart. The little chamber lit up from the red corona that sprang into existence around her body as she prepared to unleash her first spell at Wemos' dungeon. Ironically, it was the same one that his former master had struck her iceberg with not long ago - one of the few ways to take down magically-reinforced dungeon walls. Ami didn't think her enemies could locate her within her own territory, but nevertheless teleported to the next bunker to repeat the process. Better safe than sorry.

The earth shook, and a long crack appeared in the demonic mural facing the waiting troops, splitting the decoration vertically in half. The rock was still vibrating when the first imps launched themselves at the weakened wall, hewing loose the thick, tight-fitting blocks. A few seconds later, the sounds of metal striking stone ceased when the obstacle collapsed, creating a jagged gap in the wall. Behind it, a corridor with blood-red tiling turned and twisted, very unlike the straight lines and orthogonal angles that Ami preferred. An imp squeaked when a reaperbot pushed her through the opening and followed with stomping footsteps. The metal monstrosity had to duck to pass through the hole and dislodged a few more blocks as it tried to squeeze through the gap. The one behind it, clearly piloted by an

impatient goblin, helped it out with a kick to the back that sent it sprawling. Heedless of the loud crashing noises, the first imp was already performing a short sequence of dance steps as it trampled her Mistress' magic into the ground, superseding Wemos' claim and slowly extending Mercury's territory. A moment later, the tiny creature hesitated and looked up in dread as the air chilled around her. The torchlight itself seemed to lose its warmth as a quintet of transparent figures with half-rotted faces drifted into sight from around a bend, skeletal fingers reaching toward the intruders accompanied by the rattle of ghostly chains. The imp took one look at them, screamed, and clung to the leg of the nearest reaperbot, shaking in fright.

"Back you fools! Remain in formation! Stand side to side, block the tunnel, and keep advancing!" Cathy shouted into the automaton control chamber.

A mosaic made up of small scrying screens showed her the battle from the perspective of each individual pilot. Her strained expression softened slightly as the goblins followed her order and began driving back the tide of ghosts with each swing of their scythes. "All right, that's bette - cut those chains! Cut them now!" she screeched when a group of spectres entangled the foremost of the automatons with a mess of thrown chains. The restraints went taut as the undead started pulling in concert to drag their almost invulnerable opponent out of position. Sparks flew as blades scraped along unyielding chain link. "New plan: go get them!" Cathy ordered and watched with satisfaction as the gaggle of clanking automatons rushed forward, jumping over their fallen comrade to reach the busy ghosts. "Good, now get back into-"

A black blur appeared out of nowhere, and one of the reaperbots was suddenly spinning through the air like a top, missing an arm. For a moment, Cathy could see a short, slender figure standing in front of the middle reaperbot, whose chest was manifesting a row of deep dents as dainty fists smashed into it like sledgehammers. "Fuck! *Mercury, vampire at breach three!"*

The automaton reeling under the blows kicked at its attacker, but the

black-robed vampiress flowed around the attack almost contemptuously - only for a chainmail-clad girl of ice, who hadn't been there a moment before, to jump on her back. The automaton's brutish hands closed on the clinched enemy's head before she could get loose and exerted pressure. An instant later, its hands slammed into each other in a mockery of a clap as the agile monster turned into a swarm of bats that was suddenly behind the reaperbot. The vampire returned to her true form while her clumsy opponent was still turning around, and swiped with her claws at its back - only to pull her hand back at the last moment as if burnt. Her confused frown turned into wide-eyed surprise when she noted the square trench filled with shallow water that the enemy Keeper must have built around her just now to trap her. Jumping high into the air, she turned into a fat bat, ready to cross the lethal barrier. Before she had flapped her wings twice, a white-glowing maul slammed into her like a tennis racket, carried her along, and pancaked her against the wall. Ash-like dust trickled down from the depression left in the wall when the owner of the weapon retracted his green arm. His outline blurring with the distorting effect of a speed-up spell, the troll retreated back into uncontested tunnels to let the expendable warriors deal with the enemy cannon fodder.

"Thanks, Mercury, that's one vampire down for good. We need more imps here to secure the area, there's an intersection coming up."

"I'll do what I can, but I'm busy here picking off enemy imps," Ami thought back. *"Don't be afraid to concede some territory if it helps keep the losses down. We can take it back easier than we can replace the bots!"*

Cathy spared a moment to survey the damage her troops had taken. One bot dented but functional, another missing an arm and not responding. She turned to the two warlocks assisting her and barked "Disconnect pilot pod twenty-three and attach it to one of the replacement bots. Pilot twenty-three, move to the transfer area as soon as your replacement is ready."

"Yep!" a tiny voice acknowledged from one of the capsules lowered into the floor. Cathy returned her full attention to the displays.

Ami felt like screaming. As soon as she had dealt with one problem, two more took its place, and the moment her attention waned, a tunnel would suddenly collapse, cracks would appear in her water basins, or a strike force of vampires would teleport in and rip a bunch of reaperbots to shreds before she could deploy trolls to deal with them. She wiped the sweat from her - or rather, Tiger's - brow. She was still advancing, slowly, but it was much harder and costlier than she had expected. Keeper Wemos had to be some sort of prodigy, able to predict and counter her moves almost before she had decided to make them. If the stakes had been lower, she would have been thrilled at the intellectual challenge, but as things stood, the situation was frightening. Not at all what she had expected from facing a novice Keeper like him. With a groan, she squashed an imp that was tunnelling toward one of her main tunnels, where it could have allowed him to drop his ghosts right into the back of her troops. She had the sinking feeling that the only thing that was keeping her ahead in the game was the fact that her opponent wasn't realising that she could stealthily claim terrain by sending rats through cracks that were too narrow for imps.

"Mercury, the reaper is pressing on ahead again! Normally not a problem, but there's a larger hall ahead!" Cathy transmitted mentally as she watched the back of the horned whirlwind of destruction through the eyes of the group of bots following his fiery hoofprints.

The demon was in rare form, stopping the incoming tide of ghosts like a particularly murderous and rabid cliff. His usual demented grin had long shifted from 'genuinely pleased' over 'orgasmic' into 'zen-like serenity'. Not even the occasional vampire or five could disturb his enjoyment. To the contrary! Hook the scythe into the left one to avoid being blown away by the gust off wind spells. Use momentum to run up the wall and bisect the surprised flying one. Burst straight through the explosion of magical power to tackle the third, bite his head off, then kick the one clawing at his back into the bunch of imitations following him. Slow down the last one and see into how many slices she could be hacked before she dissolved into black mush. And the best part was that they'd be back soon so he could kill them all over again! What, the straw-headed human was

screeching at him again? What was it now?"

"...underground! Get out of there!"

Huh? At this point, Rabixtrel noticed the ground quake underneath his hooves - just in time for the floor to break off and tumble into the hollowed-out cavern below as enemy imps shattered the supports holding it up. He wasn't the only one caught in the cave-in, however, as many of his (incredibly inferior) metal copies followed him on the way down. He landed on his back with a surprised grunt and stared up through the billowing clouds of white dust. An imp was dangling at the edge of the pit. Even as he watched, the stone she was holding onto came lose and she rolled down the steep slope, squeaking all the way to the ground. Then, the room lit up as if the sun had risen when the enemy Keeper threw masses of pale-glowing ghosts into the chamber.

"Mercury, do something! They can't handle this situation on their own!" Cathy demanded upon seeing the forces arrayed against them. The dust cloud in the air looked perforated like a swiss cheese from all the transparent bodies within taking up space.

"On it," came the terse reply, and a large group of additional bots appeared on the claimed terrain in front of the cliff, followed by a watery hand that quickly lowered them down so they could defend their fallen allies until they had dug themselves out of the debris.

The blonde's eyebrows rose as a part of the claimed ground shimmered and flowed, the tiles parting to allow an elongated structure she had never seen before rise from the ground. A new building? It almost looked like...

Two imps huddled in the corner, forgotten as ghosts and vampires clashed with reaperbots and Rabixtrel. Despite the huge numerical disparity, the wraiths were not doing too well. The horned reaper even had the time to spare a glance at the odd little imps, if only because their supremely strange behaviour had caught his eyes. One of them had retrieved a piece of parchment from her backpack and was making little scratches on it as she watched the battle. A

moment of observation later, he determined that the worker was counting kills, making a mark next to the number of each bot. Which meant the stupid doodle with two horns and the longest bar next to it was supposed to represent him. Wait a minute. The reaper snorted in anger as another oddity caught his eye.

The note-taking imp squealed in surprise when a shadow fell over her and a red-scaled hand as big as her head reached down and lifted her by her backpack. A moment later, she found herself face to teeth with the Reaper.

"WHO?" the enraged beast snarled, and a gust of searing hot breath blew the imp's helmet off her head. A claw-tipped digit was pointing at the score on the imp's chart that was higher than his own.

Ears pressed to her head, the imp lifted her short arm and pointed up, prompting the reaper's pupil-less white eyes to look in the same direction. They widened at the sight of a giant, frozen hand gripping the handle of a sword sized perfectly for its use. The giant bar of sharp metal rotated, spun, and whistled through the mass of ghosts, slaying anything in its path. Rabixtrel threw his head back and let out an ear-splitting roar. He tossed aside the imp and used the shoulders of a reaperbot as a springboard to launch himself into the thickest concentration of flying ghosts, his competitiveness roused.

"Master! I have brought what you require!" A short-haired blond vampire called happily as she appeared before Zarekos from a cloud of bats, with her arms slung around the waist of her struggling offering. She beamed at the powerful ghost with a hopeful expression on her face as she presented her prey.

Zarekos took in the nice, smooth curves, the face with big, expressive eyes, and the slender legs. Ghostly eyebrows started twitching in disbelief at the sight. The ice golem, upon spotting him, ceased her struggles and pointed her hands at him. With ten loud pops, her sharpened fingers detached and darted toward his face and heart - and passed right through him. He hadn't even bothered to defend himself. *"Begone, brainless buffoon,"* he sighed as he used his Wemos-puppet's power to throw her through space and at

Mercury's reaper. *"Note to self: do not chose any more vampires candidates purely on looks."*

The abduction of her ice golem allowed Ami to get her first look at the interior of Zarekos' temple through the eyes of her servant.

"Mercury! Are you all right?" Snyder rushed to her side when she doubled over and retched violently.

Thankfully, she avoided making a mess since she was in Tiger's body at the time, whose stomach was empty. Deathly pale and shivering, she looked up at the acolyte and let him support her until her legs stopped shaking. "I-I saw something horrible! Wemos - or at least a red-eyed vampire - he - he looks almost normal until the neck but- but then- he's turned inside out and taken apart! You can see his bones and they don't all fit together and his organs and veins are dangling outside there but spread out over several square meters of the statue and oh kami everything is pulsing and wobbling and he's still somehow alive!"

Snyder had to steady her as she dry-heaved once again at the mere memory. "That. Um. I don't know what to say. How can this be? Is he not our main enemy? Pull yourself together, please! Your troops need you!"

"I-" Ami choked, "I- thank you." She straightened and let go of his arm. "I think I can handle it now. Zarekos!"

Snyder looked up, rubbing his arm inconspiciously where Mercury's strong grip had left white discolourations. "Zarekos? What about him?"

"I saw him! He was a ghost, reaching into W-Wemos skull! How can this be?" She shuddered once again as she remembered Nurgil's words about his former Master attempting to ascend to godhood.

Jered interrupted her train of thought. "But Wemos is the Keeper, right? Sounds as if Zarekos is using him as a tool. It doesn't sound as if he's in any shape to move around much, so if you can

remember his position, you can probably just blast him to cut off his control."

Ami suddenly smiled. "I can do even better!"

Zarekos tilted his head when two concentric magical circles appeared around the centre of the mess that was his suicidally stupid minion, counter-rotating slowly. He was, of course, familiar with the spell that produced such a pattern of blue flames. A long-range transportation spell, slow to cast, that would summon its target to the caster's location. Quite useless in combat, unless said target was unable to move, such as in this particular case. He *could* move Wemos around, of course, even though it would kill the vampire in his current state. Not a problem as such, but if he lost contact with the Keeper, he would not be able to use his powers. A possibly troublesome problem, since the iceberg bitch from across the ocean was a surprisingly resourceful opponent. For an amateur, anyway. If he had access to anywhere close to the amount of resources she had, he would have driven her back into the sea already, he was sure. Most vexing was the fact that he could not cast spells through the dungeon heart, even using Wemos as an interface. That would have made things so much easier on him. In deep concentration, he directed the defence of the dungeon for several minutes, reinforcing it with more ghosts from his temple. Hmm, yes. Soon. The transportation spell should go of in less than ten heartbeats. He lifted a finger as a signal, and one of the circling ghosts darted towards Wemos' cracked-open ribcage, grabbed the beating heart, and plucked it from its exposed perch in a shower of blood. Immediately, the separated organ and its owner dissolved into black sludge that disappeared. Zarekos grinned. As soon as the spell had gone off, he would retrieve the resurrected vampire from his coffin and resume his work. Any moment now...

A flash of red from the centre of the arcane circles distracted him. Eyes widening in shock, he stared at the figure that had teleported before him. *"What?"*

Wemos' face was a grimace of hatred and defiance as he lifted both fists in his sire's direction, middle fingers proudly erect. An instant

later, the transportation spell went off and whisked him away.

"Noooooo!" Zarekos bellowed as his plans came crashing down around him, and he reached in vain toward the spot of empty air where his slave had just been. *Suicide? Just to spite him? That... that...* An inarticulate scream of range echoed through his temple as its walls started trembling, fading from his proud red colours into a neutral, bleached grey.

"This is Jadeite from the warlock boat. We managed to summon something that crumbled into dust in the sunshine as soon as it arrived. Did we get him?"

"We did!" Ami's cheerful mental voice replied. "The enemy dungeon heart's claims are broken, and the bots are racing toward it as fast as they can manage. The vampires seem to have fled, but the ghosts are still bothering us. They aren't posing much of a challenge without support or a Keeper dropping them behind our lines though."

True to Ami's prediction, driving the wrathful spectres back toward the threshold of the temple did not take very long. Once there, however, she was hesitant to send her troops in. She had a healthy respect for the dark gods' powers, if not for the deities themselves. Rabixtrel, however, had no such qualms. The demon was taking his order to exterminate all ghosts and skeletons on the island seriously, and hopped over the broken vault door without hesitation. Blinking, Ami constructed a new scabbard-room in front of the structure, froze her watery hand, and pulled a giant-sized sword from the stone sheath. Now ready to keep her rabid minion from getting overwhelmed, she sent the weapon in after him, then possessed an ice golem and followed with quiet, hesitant steps.With most of the ghosts gone from the temple already, she now had the opportunity to properly marvel at the splendour of the grandiose hall. Although there were no gems or precious metals used in the construction at all, every stone surface was polished and gleamed like mirrors. Heavy, open incense burners hung from delicate, bridge-like cross struts that steadied the rune-covered walls against the pressure exerted by the surrounding earth. The glow emanating from the ever-burning pieces of pottery, just like the arcs of the helical stairs

running along the walls, was carefully arranged to draw all attention to the sky-scraper sized statue of Zarekos, which was the centrepiece of the temple. Sounds of battle drew Ami's eye to the third floor, where the reaper was chasing some ghosts into one of the side rooms branching from each floor. Most of the spectres were circling like flies in the open air though, well outside of his reach. Her gaze wandered further upwards along the statue, and she shuddered for a moment at the memory of what she had seen there earlier.

At its very top, the former ruler of the continent floated in the centre of the huge pentagram decorating the idol's bald forehead almost like a glowing third eye. With crossed arms and a bored expression, he hung motionless in mid-air, his mantle forming crimson wings around him. Ami wasted no time. Her oversized sword hurled through the air like a spear, propelled by her anger at his atrocities. Even from her distant point of view, she thought she could see his eyebrows rise as the blade bore down on him.

With a thunderous thud, the enormous weapon skewered the ghostly figure and buried itself in the pentagram behind it. Due to the monument's huge size, it looked as if a dagger was protruding from its forehead. Ami stared up at the metallic weapon that was still vibrating from the impact. She had goten him, right?

"Interesting, but your futile and foolish efforts shall fail to find any frailties." Zarekos' telepathic voice brushed like scratchy fingers over her brain. There was no helping it, then. She'd have to get closer to properly fight him. A black flash, and her altered uniform replaced the ice golem's chainmail. Just in time, she remembered that trying to use the Dark Kingdom-derived floating spell would cause this body to shatter. Instead, she summoned a new hand, froze it, and stepped onto its palm so it could lift her up to the blade, and activated her visor on the way up.

Zarekos was waiting for her. She *had* struck him, she realised when she saw that the sword went straight through his midsection and should have cleaved him in half at the waist. Instead, he simply drifted upwards when he spotted her, until his feet were level with the blade's surface so that it looked as if he was standing on it.

"So I meet my murderer," Zarekos mocked, causing Ami to tense. She still remembered that he had been able to harm her before even while she was possessing a body. Her sensor's readout didn't do anything to ease her mind. Her first theory, that the body she saw was just a projection, was firmly contradicted by the amount of power her visor displayed emanating from the evil ghost's location. *"Fortunately for me, but unfortunately for you, I have attained true immortality."*

Ami put a lightning bolt through his brain.

"Now, your trouncing of my tools troubles me," Zarekos continued, as if he wasn't even noticing her systematically throwing every combat spell she knew at him, one after the other, with no more success than her first attempt. *"Since I still required them. You put my precious plans into peril shortly before their culmination."* All fake warmth disappeared from the vampire lord's voice as he narrowed his eyes.

Warnings flashed across Ami's visor, and suddenly, she couldn't move.

"Destruction is what you deserve, but necessity stays my hand. You will finish my work! Defiance is death. Serve me well, however, and I may even share some secrets." The pressure pinning Ami in place increased. *"Make your choice."*

Last edited: Oct 17, 2016

Resignation

Originally on 2010-11-28T01:57:00

Zarekos stood with his hands clasped behind his back on the giant sword protruding from the forehead of his statue, the very image of smug confidence. In contrast, the black-clad ice girl pinned in place on her frozen platform by his stare had her hands raised in a defensive stance.

Ami *knew* she couldn't move or transport herself. She could read this right from Zarekos' soul-piercing eyes. The ghostly vampire was waiting for her answer, and he wouldn't like it. Even if she had been willing to work for a monster like him in the first place, she would have reconsidered the moment she saw how he treated his previous underlings. Unfortunately, the alternative seemed just as bad. If she died and ended up in the dark gods' realm, she could expect no mercy. How was she going to get out of this? Oh! Her beleaguered mind had almost missed the simplest solution! She could stop supporting the ice hand she was standing on!

With great relief, she felt the floating surface under her feet drop away. Zarekos appeared to shoot upwards as gravity took a hold of her and yanked her down. In a moment, the sword's surface would cut their mutual eye-contact. Ami was ready to teleport away as soon as the ghost's piercing, transparent eyes disappeared behind the obstacle. A jolt went through her body, making the water within gurgle as she stopped unexpectedly. Two ghosts had caught her! A deep chill that went far beyond physical coldness spread out from underneath her shoulders, where the pale apparitions were holding her.

Zarekos peered down at her from his perch, raising both of his eyebrows for a look that seemed to say "just how dumb do you think I am?"

The sound of her ice hand impacting the marble floor deep below shattered the tense silence. The sharp-edged ice splinters bounced

across the lower floors, pinging off solid surfaces and shattering into even more pieces. It sounded as if a hailstorm was raging in the temple's depths.

Zarekos' patience ran out. *"Such saddening stubbornness. Perhaps your successor shall serve to my satisfaction instead."*

Ami felt unreasonable terror as the pressure bearing down on her rose, squeezing the life out of her as it constricted her chest and slowly, painfully suffocated her. She'd die at this rate! She should just surrender and serve him! She couldn't oppose a god! Wait. Even with her thoughts scrambled by the rising panic, those thoughts didn't feel right. Something was deeply incongruous about the situation. She tried to calm down, which wasn't easy when almost passing out from lack of air. Suddenly, she realised what was wrong. *This body doesn't need to breathe!*

"Well, vermin? What words will be your last?" The crushing force on Ami let up a little as the vampire ghost leered at her with a sadistic grin.

"Shut up, charlatan," a new voice surprised them both.

Ami would have recognised it even without seeing the owner. Through Zarekos' transparent form, she could see Marda's striding along one of the cross struts arching above the statue's head like a halo. *What is she doing here?*

"You insect, insulting-" Zarekos began, not taking his eyes off Mercury.

Marda burst into motion and jumped off the bridge-like construction into the yawning void. Ami would have gasped if her body was obeying her. The chainmail-clad troll grabbed onto the arm-thick chain holding up one of the hanging incense burners, which started swinging like a pendulum from the transferred momentum. Sparks flew from her gauntlets as they scraped over the chain's links while she slid down its length. As soon as her toes made contact with the top of the swinging incense burner, she leaped a second time. With a loud clang, her metal soles landed on the flat of the giant blade, and she crouched to cushion the impact. The enormous weapon

quivered like a springboard from the impact. "I said shut up. I'm neither one of your spawn you can control, nor stupid enough to meet your hypnotic gaze."

Zarekos' expression remained bored even as the stocky troll strode without hurry toward his floating form. *"Imbecile. I am a nascent god, immortal and inviolate!"*

"Don't make me laugh. I know very well that the Avatar's mantle you are clinging to is the only thing keeping you alive. Without your minions, you would be powerless." Marda grinned, showing her uneven teeth. "I bet you can't even move from your spot."

Zarekos frowned *"How did you kn-"* His eyes went impossibly wide in shock, and he reared back as if he had been slapped *"Kill her! KILL HER!"*

Ami was suddenly free as the former Keeper lost all interest in her and caused the ghosts holding her to let go so they could streak toward Marda like pale comets. With nothing supporting her weight, Ami tumbled into the depths - only to bump into an ascending ghost on the way down. Her ice body cracked as it bounced off the spectre and flipped over, replacing her view of the ceiling with that of the floor. A white glow was surging up through the cylindrical tower like lava pouring from an erupting volcano. All the ghost in the temple flew upwards, rushing to their master's aid. The falling ice golem slammed into the wall of skeletal faces on her way down, smashing through the first and losing an arm from the collision. Ami, angry at being taken so easily by Zarekos' trick, abandoned the doomed body to possess a new one that she willed into existence behind him, on the bald head of his oversized statue. Below, she could hear the reaper bellow in fury as his prey flew off.

"Mercury! Destroy her, or she will destroy us both!" Zarekos howled with a terror-filled mental voice, all composure lost.

Through his transparent form, she could see Marda charge at him along the sword's blade, raising a white-glowing fist. Two wraiths fluttered behind her like banners, their limbs draped around the troll's neck and shoulders as she dragged them along. *He's afraid of holy magic,* Ami realised with vicious satisfaction. Behind Marda, the

main force of ghosts spilled forth from the depths and flowed around the giant blade, grasping at the running troll's legs with rotting claws. Ami raised both hands, called on her dungeon heart's magic, and raked the front ranks of the attackers with sizzling lightning. In the flickering glare, Marda drew back her hand for a powerful haymaker, backlit by the arcs of electricity jumping across her pursuers.

"You fool have doomed us b-" Zarekos' terrified screech ended abruptly as a gauntleted fist flattened his face, which bent under the force until his skull caved in.

Reaching through his dissolving form, Marda clawed in passing at the crimson cloth of the mantle that had started drifting toward the ground, and kept going. A quick leap launched her off the giant sword that shook with each footstep, and onto the top of the giant statue's head, where Ami was waiting for her.

"Marda, you did it!" Ami cheered, glad that Zarekos was finally defeated "When did you get here?"

The troll rushed past her without slowing down, the red mantle wrapped around her armoured forearm flapping behind her. "They are all yours," she commented, raising a thumb at the wave of murderous ghosts about to crash down on them. "I quit!"

"What?" A minion bond shattered in the back of Ami's mind with a searing sensation, and she barely had enough time to process the troll's statement before the angry spectres were on her. Ghostly hands ripped and tore at her frozen body and swept it along. Ami was too baffled by Marda's sudden desertion to pay attention to the chains entangling her. Despite the fingers around her neck trying to strangle the life out of her disposable form, she managed to turn her head in the troll's direction. Where the bulky figure should have been, a flat, dark oval waved slowly in the air like a mirror that had been drawn on a piece of transparent wallpaper. The portal looked exactly like the one that Umbra had located on the trolls' island. With rising alarm, Ami noticed more minion links snapping. *"Everyone, by careful! The trolls are deserting!"* she transmitted mentally, alerting her employees to the danger. *I better deal with this pile of ghosts before I break apart completely,* she thought as water escaped through cracks in her shell. For an instant, the icy shape of her

golem body lit up like a brilliant gem. A network of lines within glowed like a nervous system made of sunlight as it conducted raw magic toward the growing, golf-ball-sized speck of light forming above Ami's left palm. A flash of searing light and a thunderous rumble later, the majority of the leaderless ghosts had been devoureded by a rapidly-expanding fireball that blackened the polished cranium of Zarekos' statue. The ravenous survivors, buffeted and scattered by the shockwave, drifted through space in confusion. Since their prey had turned into superheated steam, they floated aimlessly until a new sound attracted their attention. Driven by all-consuming hunger, they launched themselves toward the source of the rapid, stomping footsteps racing up the staircase. The reaper's anticipatory grin widened as his hooves cleared four steps at a time in his haste to meet them.

The air in the command tent of the combined city forces smelled of overcooked meat, not that the enraged monsters within were at all interested in the fat-dripping and slightly charred contents of their plates. With two notable exceptions. The out-of-breath goblin messenger, who had just brought unwelcome news from the warlocks, eyed the meat enviously from where he stood forgotten near the open tent flap. To his great chagrin, he was downwind of a huge bile demon seated right next to the door. The rotund dignitary, whose gold-studded, intricate harness did not hide all of the near-spherical demon's many combat scars, kept shovelling food into his maw while shouting into the round. "How dare she?" he bellowed, spraying the table in front of him with half-chewed bits. "She pre-empted our revenge!"

"Silence!" the tallest member of the group shouted, banging his dark blue fist on the table hard enough that the flimsy wood splintered from his strike. The assembled creatures shut up, except for a few hotheads who quieted down one by one as the dark angel glared at them individually. With the two sole torches in the room right behind him, his red-burning eyes were the most prominent feature of his shadowed face. While not uncommon for the species, his were bright enough that there was some doubt on whether he was a Keeper or not. So far, he had declined answering the question, and

no one had dared push the issue. "Good. Uncoordinated bickering will get us nowhere. Yes, Keeper Mercury has defeated Wemos. Yes, that means that she will have stolen everything he looted from us. But does it change anything?" He paused, taking a long sip from the skull-encrusted goblet standing before him while his associates grumbled. "NO!" Wine splashed onto his hand as he threw the goblet away. "This changes nothing! We still have the same army. We are still going to attack a Keeper! It simply isn't the same one!"

"She did not kill all vampires involved in the attack, either. The loss of face would be tremendous if we let this stand," a particularly muscular orc with a broken nose agreed, his mop of oily grey hair bobbing up and down as he nodded deliberately.

"The troops won't stand for it," a one-eyed hag wearing warlockrobes cautioned in a high-pitched, grating tone of voice. "They were conscripted to destroy Wemos. They will not fight now that he is gone."

"I'm sure that some gold will change their opinion rather quickly," the dark angel pointed out.

"You suggest we pay them?" A knight-like warrior with too many spikes studding the shoulders of his black armour growled. His angry voice resonated within his horned helmet as he continued "This entire expedition has cost enough already! We were never going to make a profit, and there's no reason to throw good money after bad!"

"I don't think that money will be a problem," the angelic general answered. His black wings rustled as he moved them aside so he could lean against the back of his chair properly. "Warlock! Show them!"

"Yes, master! Immediately, master!" answered a voice from outside. A haggard, long-robed figure blocked out the light from the camp fires pouring in through the doorway. The wizard raised his feet high to step over the goblin corpse with a goblet embedded in its forehead and proceeded towards the table, a crystal ball clutched protectively to the chest. "The dragon, master?" he verified, a servile smile on his face that would not have looked out-of-place on an imp.

"Indeed."

The shabbily-dressed magician deposited his scrying device in a central spot on the table, where it lit up as he closed his eyes and started muttering. The other monsters leaned in with expressions ranging from sceptical to curious. Eyes widened and gasps went through the room as they beheld the interior of Mercury's iceberg, where an enormous corpse could have been mistaken for a terrain feature at first glance. Despite her warlocks' best efforts to render the carcass into its valuable component parts, most of the dragon was still intact, and the damage they had done to the blue-and-green-scaled body was insufficient to detract from its awe-inspiring majesty. Even the bile demon stopped chewing for a moment as he beheld the sights in silence.

"Do you not think such a prize would be worthy of our attention?" the dark angel asked into the room, sounding smug.

"Are you *insane*?" A hooded dark elf jumped up from her chair and slammed her palms on the table. "You want to attack someone who managed to kill *that*?"

"The priesthood of Azzathra assures me most insistingly that their God places the blame for the creature's death entirely on Keeper Alphel's shoulders. Mercury is simply profiteering from the situation."

"Is that so?" The elf started snickering. "I wouldn't want to be in Alphel's place, then. Consider my objection retracted."

"Good," the black knight chuckled as he rubbed his hands. "We can make a statement by destroying Mercury, and might even make a profit from this yet!"

"Perhaps," the one-eyed crone allowed, "but only if we attack soon. Larger shares of the loot for everyone that way."

"Larger shares of the casualties, too. I would prefer it if we waited for our force to be at full strength," the orc disagreed.

"Don't be a fool! Do you really think the others are still going to show up, now that Wemos is dead?" the old woman mocked and let out a

long, dry cackle.

"Who are you calling a fool?" the tall humanoid growled, muscles rippling under his pink skin as he went for his maul and lifted himself from his chair.

"Sit down!" the dark angel thundered. "It is decided. Get your troops ready immediately so we can strike at Keeper Mercury while she is still recovering from her recent battle!" he demanded, standing up as he spoke and casting a long shadow over the assembly. "Go now," he pointed at the exit, "the last Keeper on the Avatar Islands dies today!"

Ami transported herself back into the new command centre, where Cathy was already waiting for her. "All the trolls just left," the blonde announced without hesitation, "fortunately, they didn't make any trouble. Jered was the first to notice that something was wrong."

The weasel-featured man nodded. "I was just looking at the reserves waiting in the back of the room when one of them spat out a false tooth and crushed it in his fist, and *that* appeared." His dagger-filled bandoleer clattered against his breastplate as he lifted his arm to point at the luminescent apparition that wafted slowly in an unfelt breeze. The human-sized portal looked exactly like the one Marda had opened. "They all just jumped in."

"At least they didn't attack anyone," Ami said with heartfelt relief. The ethereal gateway floating in the far end of the command centre, guarded by three burly reaperbots, worried her deeply. If it was two-way, it could potentially deposit enemies straight within the dungeon. "What about the trolls out on vampire-hunting duties?"

"Same as here. Identical portals in three locations. I marked them on the map for you," Jered reported, gesturing vaguely in the direction of the stone table. "Do you have any idea why they chose this time to desert? What set them off?"

"I can imagine that they don't like our chances against the Underworld army," Cathy commented, crossing her arms. "They

stay out of the battle, wait until the army is done and leaves, and then this continent is theirs without raising a hand."

Ami glanced at the location of the other portals and dismissed them as immediate concerns, since all of them were hundreds of kilometres away. "Where are they, anyway?" Ami asked as she dropped a few imps around the portal. On her orders, one jumped into the transparent oval, but passed right through the paper-thin surface without interacting with it. The other two started swinging their picks and digging out a pit underneath the phenomenon. Ami didn't think it would disturb the hovering gate, but at least it would make things harder on uninvited intruders. She turned her head to look at the acolyte who was waiting in the corner. "Snyder, can you activate it?

The redhead scratched the back of his head, messing up his neat bowl cut in the process. "Ah, well, perhaps. In fact, it is likely that I could. This seems to be some kind of hero gate. However, I could only pass through it myself, not keep it open for others. I strongly advise against that," he added nervously. "I would be going in blind, and I do not know what awaits me at the destination."

Ami briefly considered the benefits of sending him through and immediately retrieving him with her Keeper powers to find out where it lead, but almost immediately rejected that option. She had no guarantee that he would remain within range of her transportation ability, and the benefits were not worth the potential risks when she had alternatives that she could try first. "Show me Marda on the scrying screen," she ordered, turning to the closest of the water-backed glass rectangles lining the stone wall.

"Immediately, Keeper," the warlock sitting in front of it confirmed as he put his fingertips against the scrying device's silvery frame. Prompted by his touch, the cloudy fog within cleared to show not only the chainmail-wearing troll female, but also the rest of the missing troops.

"That's not one of the rooms on their island," Ami declared upon seeing the state of the walls. "The bricks are smaller and newer-looking than those in their hideout, and Umbra didn't report anything like that huge design on the ground." With great interest, the blue-

haired girl leaned in closer to get a better view of the complex diagram that must have taken days, if not weeks to prepare. "You other warlocks, zoom out further and see if you recognise the landscape, please. I need to know where they are!"

As the magicians muttered affirmations, Ami waved Snyder to her side so he could have a better look at the twenty-six green-skinned creatures positioned in pairs around the arcane pattern. "Snyder, do you recognise what they are doing? It almost looks as if they are praying." For each duo of trolls, one of them was kneeling on the ground with closed eyes, his arms spread and his palms pointing toward the centre of the design, while the other stood behind him, hands resting on his shoulders. Each and every of them seemed focused on the crimson piece of silver-embroidered cloth lying in the very centre of the symmetrical pattern. *The mantle of the Avatar,* Ami thought, recognising the garment as the one Marda had pilfered from Zarekos' ghost.

"It bears a great resemblance to cleansing rituals, such as would be used to remove the taint of supernatural evil from a victim," Snyder said after observing the preparations. "This particular rite is not familiar to me, unfortunately. I can only assume that such a gap in my knowledge is due to this being a local, specialised variant of a more common ceremony. It may even have been made up on the spot to accommodate the presence of uneducated trolls." The redhead's brown eyes narrowed slightly as he inspected the layered, concentric circles inscribed into the mirror-smooth floor with white-glowing runes. "I am also baffled by the excessive amount of protective wards. They are inverted too, facing inwards. This is counter-productive to a cleansing attempt, since they will prevent the dislodged corruption from dispersing. They will instead trap it with the object that should be purified."

"Makes sense to me, and I'm not the acolyte here," Cathy commented. "Destroying the darkness is better than letting it escape into the environment."

"On this continent?" Snyder raised an eyebrow haughtily, "besides, I cannot think of anything that would warrant this many layers of protection. I assume a fully-powered Keeper could bust out of it, given a few hours, but-"

Ami's eyes widened and glowed a little brighter. "Um, they can't use that against me, can they?" she asked and started to sweat. The memory of Nero's spell was still fresh in her mind, and she didn't want to run afoul of more of that kind of magic.

"Unless you are a demon, you should not be susceptible to specific summoning spells," the redhead said and put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "Oh, look! Their efforts are starting in earnest."

Lines of glowing white crept inward like water running through furrows and reached the centre of the circles. As soon as the first thread of power touched the folded-up mantle, it recoiled and shot into the air, almost too fast to see. It unfolded in the process, and the trolls flinched as if they had been struck. The red garment fluttered in the air, hovering as if it was draped over invisible shoulders. A crown of black flame, spiky and jagged, slowly circled where a wearer's head would have been. Ami's eyes refused to properly focus on the emptiness caressed by the heavy fabric. Somehow, the nothingness felt painful to look at despite being empty space. "What is *that*?" she asked, not even noticing that she had lowered her voice to a whisper.

The acolyte shrugged his shoulders in confusion, but Jered took the opportunity to comment. "Whatever it is, it's bad enough to corrode the screen from behind all those wards!" the wavy-haired man muttered, moving his hands to his daggers by reflex. A patch of glass roughly corresponding to the mantle's image was going milky, obstructing the view of the shape within.

Forced to direct her attention elsewhere, Ami noticed the polished ground underneath the hovering cape wither away into sand. With some relief, she saw that the ruin did not cross the interior circle of the warding scheme. Still, the trolls were grimacing and bending over as they struggled to maintain the flow of holy power. In places, the glowing lines were even receding back the way they had come. The mantle moved, and a surge of power dimmed warding runes in a straight line that lead outward from the centre. The troll kneeling in its path keeled over, coughing up blood. Ami thought she caught a glimpse of broken ribs poking out through leathery green skin before the troll behind him rolled him aside so he could take his place. A dispersed, wider push bowled over three of the praying creatures at

once, but they stirred a few seconds after their replacements had taken over for them. Ami, as an uninvolved observer, hoped that they were not hurt too much. To her, it looked as if the ritual was succeeding despite the setbacks. Some of the glowing lines were crawling through the air now, reaching like ribbons toward the fluttering mantle. Finally, one of the white bands coming in from behind managed to tag the fabric.

The mantle reacted the moment it felt the touch and whirled around to face the source of the holy energy. This time, Ami was sure she saw a distortion in the air as something invisible raised its arm. Both trolls in the path of the dimming runes went flying, trailing blood from deep lacerations. It was too late for the mantle, though. Where the first streamer of holy energy had touched it, one of the silver designs embroidered into its seams burned with brilliant light. Around it, dirty red flakes loosened in patches, revealing snow-white fabric beneath the coating of crimson. Exploiting the weakness, more ribbons of light struck home, accelerating the process. Ami was reminded of those washing agent TV adds where computer-animated dirt crumbled off magnified threads. In this case, however, the blood-red dirt was not falling to the ground. Instead, it gathered into a sphere underneath the floating crown, growing denser with each passing moment. Before the blob could do more than grow rudimentary arm and leg stumps, though, some critical threshold of cleansed to corrupted fabric was passed. A burst of silver fire consumed the rest of the stain and jumped over to the floating mass, which burned with a darting flame. The hovering crown disappeared last, snuffed out like a candle in the wind.

As the sweat-drenched trolls collapsed to the floor, Marda burst into motion. The rings of her chainmail reflected the last flickers of magic dancing across the diagram as she entered the design and darted toward the falling mantle. She snatched it out of the air before it could hit the ground and turned on one leg, stirring up the dust from the withered floor as she changed direction. In an instant, she was near the motionless form of the first of her warriors who had fallen to the corrupted mantle's attacks. With steady, gentle motions, she draped the garment over the body. To Ami's surprise, the still troll suddenly started coughing. When Marda lifted the mantle a few seconds later, no trace of the seemingly mortal wounds remained,

and no blood marred the white cloth. While Ami watched, the troll's leader repeated the process for the other two soldiers who had been wounded during the ritual, with similar success. Was this the power of the Avatar's mantle? She wished hospitals had something like it. Perhaps she could learn how to emulate this power and bring it to her home?

On the screen, Marda was moving again. Ami watched in horrified fascination as the troll woman stripped off her chainmail piece by piece, revealing more and more of her green-skinned body with no concern for modesty. When the last piece clattered to the ground, she took the now pristinely white mantle and draped it over her shoulders. The garment was too long for the stocky troll, but as soon as it settled in place, her form stretched and straightened, flattening out around the chest area and gaining bulk around the shoulders. Marda grew until the silver-runed seam of the mantle no longer touched the ground. Ami gasped in surprise and covered her mouth, blushing deeply. She had gotten so used to the female Marda that she had almost forgotten the troll insisting that she was male. Thus, Marda's gender change only caught her slightly off-guard. The fact that the troll had changed into a short-bearded, *human* male who looked to be in his early forties came as a complete surprise. She caught a short glimpse of a well-muscled, if malnourished physique before she averted her eyes.

"The hell? She was human all along?" Jered muttered before something else caught his attention "Hey! That new armour the trolls are bringing him looks as if it has been nabbed from our forges! That's-" He fell silent when the man in the vision started glowing. First, his skin appeared only mildly fluorescent, but then the glow ramped up until the screen whited out. "Huh?"

"I have located them!" a triumphant shout came from a dark wizard to the right.

"Already?" With one arm, Ami shielded her eyes against the glare as she squinted at the other screen.

"Well, it's hard to miss," the warlock said with a crooked grin, though his eyebrows curved upward in fright. He tilted his head toward the column of searing white light towering over the horizon as it stabbed

into the sky.

"Good job! Cathy, can you mark it on the map please? Cathy?"

The swordswoman stood still like a statue and had gone as pale as the many ghosts that haunted this realm. "Th-that's- It couldn't be..."

King Albrecht woke with a start, roused by the loud bangs against his bedroom door. The monarch rubbed his eyes as he sat up. Through the window, he could see the moon hang low over the horizon. Sunrise seemed to be still a few hours away, and he groaned. Still, his subjects wouldn't wake him if it wasn't urgent. Reluctantly, he got out from underneath the covers and fumbled for his royal slippers on the soft carpet. Of course, he stubbed his toe. "What is it?" he bit out through clenched teeth.

"Your Majesty! The abbot requires your presence! He has urgent news from the Avatar Islands!"

This was enough to drive the sleep from his mind. With great haste, he put on his ermine-edged bathrobe and rushed for the door. Outside, a red-and-white-robed acolyte waited, flanked by two palace guards. "What happened?"

"The Avatar! The Avatar has returned!" the acolyte reported with shining eyes.

"Is that true?" the King's breath caught. "Didn't that devil Mukrezar destroy his powers?"

"Temples all over your Kingdom are reporting his return! It appears that Mukrezar lied," the acolyte blurted out with infectious joy. "We should have put more trust in the power of the Light!"

"That is astoundingly good news indeed," Albrecht agreed with a large smile as he followed the black-haired young man. The return of the champion of Good would rekindle hope in the hearts of all the good folk of the world! "It doesn't sound like the kind of urgent message that requires an immediate audience with the abbot, however?"

"There's more! Our diviners report that Keeper Mercury appeared at his location!"

"What? Get me to the nearest crystal ball, NOW!"

The army of mixed Underworld creatures preparing for battle reeked of fear, and the usual boisterous noise of the camp seemed more subdued than usual. The news their warlocks had relayed a few minutes ago had spread like a wildfire, dealing a huge blow to morale.

"Comrades," a troll with a loud, nasal voice shouted from the top of a broken-off stalagmite that formed a natural stage. Many soldiers paused their activities to look at the greenskin. "No amount of gold could make this assault worthwhile! Not only does Keeper Mercury have a horned reaper," grumbles from the crowd forced him to speak louder, "but now the Avatar is loose there, too, and our illustrious leaders want to go up against *that*! We all remember what Mukrezar had to do to take him down, and-" he suddenly wrapped his arms around himself and shivered as a cold wind howled around him. It picked up in intensity, snapped off the icicle growing from his nose, and blew him off his perch. With a dull thud, the frozen body landed on the ground and rolled away.

"Don't pay attention to that coward," the black-winged form that had appeared over the crowd shouted. "Continue your preparations."

"Moron. Making himself a target like that," an orc grumbled to his neighbour, a male dark elf with pierced ears.

"Guy had a good point, though," the elf replied. "Especially about Mukrezar."

"Never was good with history," the orc hummed as he leaned down to fasten his bronze greaves. "How *did* he beat the Avatar?"

"Threw troops at him until the death toll was high enough to consecrate the area to Crowned Death and do a ritual to make his powers gutter out."

"Fuck."

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Divine Opposition, Part 1 (DARK)

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Ami appeared in the dark crimson sky above the ruins of Skybird Trill, the former capital of the realm. The ice-golem body she was possessing immediately dropped like a stone, the short skirt of its black leotard fluttering around it. On the way down, she still had time enough to touch her right earring and summon her visor. The very visible pillar of light had erupted from somewhere on this hill, and she quickly scanned the area to see whether approaching further was safe. Satisfied that the symbols flitting across the eyepiece showed nothing but residual energy dissipating into the area, she caught herself with her Keeper hand and gently deposited her frozen form on top of a remaining piece of the broken city walls. The scorched stone groaned and shuddered underneath her weight, and she jumped back when a withered piece of the crenelations sagged and broke away, followed into the depths by a rattling avalanche of smaller debris and dust. About two seconds later, the piece of masonry struck the ground with the sound of snapping wood. At the unexpected sound, Ami turned her back to the city and curiously approached the newly-damaged spot. She hadn't seen any deadwood in the area for the boulder to strike. Perhaps the remains of a siege tower? Her fingers went up to her mouth once she peered into the dust cloud, down at the spot where the plummeting weight had sunken deeply into the snowdrift-like slopes nestling up against the base of the wall. White, bleached bones shone through the broken layer of ash and dirt. Ami boggled as she realised the sheer amount of skeletons needed to form an elevated ring that encircled most of the fortifications. This wasn't a simple mass grave, a scan through the dirt cover informed her. All these beings had fallen in combat. On the piles of bones, she saw crushed and broken goblin skulls, orc skeletons pierced by arrows and broken spears, and even a dragon with a harpoon stuck between its neck vertebrae. Ami's mind shied away from the sheer scale of the carnage that the desperate defenders had inflicted on the attacking forces. She shuddered as another thought went through her head. How terrifying must the leaders of the besiegers have been to make their troops

throw themselves into this meat grinder?

The young Keeper put these thoughts out of her mind as she prepared to find Marda. Her gaze swept over the remains of the city as she scanned for traces of the column-of-light phenomenon. The besiegers had not been kind in victory. Behind the inner walls, the fortress itself was nothing but a pile of charred rubble, and even with the aid of Ami's visor, it was hard for her to determine what had once been streets and what dwellings. Only some structures were in a slightly better state, perhaps due to their thicker walls. Ami decided to start her search with the tallest of them; the lower half of a caved-in guard tower looming over the wasteland like a tall, half-burnt candle. She almost didn't need her computer to find her quarry, since she could simply follow the strong feeling of apprehension that radiated from that direction. After a short moment of hesitation, she transported herself to the moving sources of warmth that her visor was detecting on the second floor of the ruin.

She appeared in a dusty hall whose furniture had been plundered and smashed. On its other side, the troop of missing trolls entering through the doorway froze in mid-step when they spotted her gleaming form, and took combat stances. Their leader, a tall human with narrow, elegant eyebrows and a short, reddish beard did not show surprise and crossed his arms. The white mantle draped over his armoured shoulders wrapped around him like folding wings as he threw a challenging look at his uninvited guest. "Keeper Mercury."

"Marda?" The figures she read on her visor were making her nervous, and her reaction to the holy power emanating from the man didn't help either.

The regal-looking figure frowned in distaste, cobalt-blue eyes cold. "My real name is Amadeus, though Keepers like you should refer to me by my title. Avatar."

"So Cathy was right," Ami muttered. "You are the previous ruler of this realm, then?"

"Previous *and* current ruler. Now that my powers are restored, you and all the other dark ones shall finally be purged from my lands!"

His tone remained deceptively calm, but Ami thought she could detect some of that intense, tightly controlled anger that she had sensed in the back of Marda's mind.

"Um, I'm not here to challenge your claim on this domain," the statue-girl said quickly. "I only came here to find knowledge. Surely we can negotiate a non-violent solution?"

Rather than removing some of the tension, Ami's words seemed to annoy the Avatar. A few swift steps brought the armoured figure to the balcony. "Come here! Look around you! Look at what you Keepers did to my country! Do you think I would *tolerate* the presence of a Keeper in my lands after all they did?"

Ami approached with slow, hesitant steps, careful to not make any threatening moves. "I could leave on the iceberg once-"

"Look out there!" he pointed at a valley far out in the wasteland. "That sea of lava used to be a town that was famous for its art and music." His arm moved to another spot. "This used to be lush forest, where fairies danced around standing stones. The laughter of their children turned into heart-rending screams as the Keepers' hordes boiled them alive!" He swept his arm around in an all-encompassing gesture as his voice grew louder. "All this wasteland was once full of life and joy, destroyed for the sick enjoyment of your ilk! All those lives, gone forever!"

"I-"

Amadeus ignored Mercury and thrust his index finger at a cobblestone-covered spot in the ruins that looked no different to Ami than any other. "That used to be a beautiful park. Its blooming cherry trees burned while Mukrezar's troops slaughtered my sons on the steps of its fountain. And there," his accusing digit moved again, "is where they forced me to watch as they tortured the citizens to death one by one, mingling my blood with theirs to desecrate this Mantle." He finally looked at Ami, glowering at her with death in his eyes. "After all that, do you really think I would let a single Keeper escape? My poor country, my poor people! I would be doing a disservice to their memories if I even considered leniency!"

"I-I'm sorry for your loss," Ami said lamely. What could you say in response to something like that?

"Don't you dare mock me, evil one! Your dark days are numbered! "

Ami found it wiser to retreat out of his reach. Her hopes for a peaceful solution were disappearing faster than ice cream in front of Usagi. "Wait! Please listen to me! I only came here to find out how to kill a dark god! Won't you help me with that?"

"Oh, certainly." Sarcasm dripped from Amadeus' voice. "I'm no expert on the topic, but It's simple! Just get a stronger god to kill it for you." He let out a short, hate-filled laugh that reminded Ami of his troll form. "I am, however, an expert in dealing with their foul minions." He took a step toward her, his fist closed around the grip of his sword.

"But I'm not evil!"

"Your lies will avail you nothing!"

"I'm not lying! I found out about you worshipping the Light and did not do anything!"

"Pragmatism. We were still of use to you," the Avatar said, his face stormy. "Now defend yourself!"

Ami transported her magically-created body to the opposite end of the chamber and tried a different approach. Perhaps he would be more receptive to logic. "Mar- Avatar! Please reconsider. Reason dictates that even with your trolls, you won't be able to breach my prepared defences. Even if my current forces aren't enough, the remaining vampires on the island should be willing to join me if it means a chance for survival!"

Amadeus snorted. "I know your strengths, weaknesses, and defences, and they do not impress me."

"Then what about the Underworld army?" Ami pleaded her case once more, "You and the trolls can't possibly fend it off alone!"

"Let them come. Ten or a thousand, it makes no difference to me.

Besides, you are wrong," the Avatar almost smiled as he tugged his mantle closer around himself, "I am *not alone!*" A curious dual quality had crept into his voice, and his eyes shone solid white.

Ami involuntarily took a step back at the sight, feeling sickened and repulsed by the power rolling off the knight in waves. She remembered that foreign tone and inflection, and the urge to flee his presence became almost a physical force. "The Light!" she gasped. Under the Avatar's boot, an old piece of a broken chair spontaneously sprouted fresh green leaves.

"That is correct, Keeper Mercury," the voice replied while the Avatar's frown dissolved into a serene expression for a moment.

As soon as it was gone though, he grimaced as if he had bitten into a particularly sour lemon. "It appears that I am not supposed to wipe you from the face of the world after all, Keeper," a hint of disbelief tinged his voice, "since you were apparently speaking the truth." Were that his teeth grinding together? The white light returned to his eyes as he continued *"However, you have not yet turned from the path we warned you against. We cannot allow you to render your world vulnerable to the influence of the dark gods, and shall proceed to seal you away within your dungeon. Will you do the right thing and surrender peacefully?"*

Ami's fingers clenched into fists. This was bad! "I'm sorry, but I can't do that. My friends need me!"

"So be it," the Light declared with a hint of sadness.

"I hoped you would say that," Amadeus replied as soon as his vocal chords wore his own again. While he looked more stable now than during his earlier tirade, it wasn't by much. With a smirk, he drew his sword from its sheath, only to freeze in mid-motion. An unusual noise from outside had caught his attention.

To Ami, it sounded almost like the roar of a motorcycle's engine. Curious about the distraction, Ami risked a glance out of the window. A red, scythe-wielding blur was approaching through the field of debris, trailed by a cone-shaped dust cloud. The demon's angry bellows became louder and more distinct the closer he got."I didn't

call him!" Ami blurted out.

"Rabixtrel," the Avatar said with a sneer. "Of course he would show up the moment he sensed my presence."

"Um, I could send him back if you leave me alone," Ami offered hopefully.

"Don't bother, he'd just return" the Avatar declared as angry stomps echoed through the rooms one floor below.

Ami considered sending the monster back anyway, but figured that if the Avatar could have handled it - somewhat - as Marda, he should be able to do even batter in his true form. *Perhaps I can learn something to use against him,* she thought as she prepared to record the battle.

Suddenly, the stomping noises from below cut off. Amadeus took a long step to the right. Where he had just stood, the floor exploded upward in a shower of dust and bricks, carried on Rabixtrel's back and shoulders as the demon noisily made his own entrance. He swung his scythe to the right while rising from his crouch, intent on cutting the Avatar in half at the waist. With a loud clang, his weapon came to a stop, parried by - no! Ami's eyes widened. Amadeus had caught the haft of the weapon with his left hand, and was now holding back the entire strength of the reaper with one arm! She didn't have time to properly analyse the forces involved, since the armoured warrior's counter-attack was so quick that she almost missed it. A straightforward stab with the sword at the demon's belly forced the beast to evade, but rather than let go of his scythe, Rabixtrel jumped over the blow, using his trapped weapon like a pole-vaulter would to launch himself high in the air. Two fiery hooves bore down on the Avatar's head, but the divinely-enhanced fighter's sword blurred upwards like an arc of quicksilver. Gravity did the rest. Ami winced in sympathy as dark, steaming blood sprayed, and the horned reaper's roar suddenly became much higher-pitched. That had to hurt! She almost missed the hero let go of the scythe and dive into a roll to avoid the falling monstrosity's vicious backward kick. Amadeus got up faster than his red-scaled opponent and was suddenly within the demon's guard. For an instant, Ami saw the tip of a white-glowing sword protrude from Rabixtrel's right biceps, and

then the Avatar hurled the heavy demon off the balcony with a textbook-precise judo throw - swinging him by the injured arm, of course. Ami gasped and caught her employee, sending him back to the nearest piece of claimed terrain before he had dropped more than two metres.

"Yes, I still got it," Amadeus nodded in satisfaction as he twirled his blood-tipped sword around, none the worse for wear from the short altercation.

Ami swallowed. This promised to become difficult. Done with his battle, the Avatar moved past her, paying little attention to her golem body as he walked toward the exit, followed by his troops. Where did he want to go, anyway? He was marching toward a staircase leading up. Hmm. Her visor beeped as she located an energy source above, through two ceilings. A hero gate! In the blink of an eye, Ami was in front of the glowing oval that billowed unaffected by the howling winds. The rest of the tower above was missing, and the cloudy sky above visible through the missing ceiling. The hole gave her an idea. She didn't know how to shut these portals down yet, but perhaps she could make it inaccessible to the enemy. With three snips of her green-sparkling fingers, a trio of imps in blue overalls appeared. "Collapse the floor, quickly!"

Small picks bit into the floor in a circular pattern, chipping through rock blocks and girders alike. The imps were only about half-way done when the structurally damaged surface groaned and collapsed under its own weight, dropping to the level below with a loud rumble. A second impact echoed the first when that floor collapsed too from the additional weight. Ami had to save her imps before they went tumbling down with the debris, but when the dust cleared, she was very satisfied with the outcome. The portal was now free-floating over a hole in the ground that was almost as wide as the tower's base. The Avatar and his troops would have to build ladders if they wanted to get to it. She could hear their swift footsteps as they emerged from the spiral staircase, coated in greyish-white dust but otherwise unharmed. The greenskins stopped at the sight and were hesitant to approach the ragged edge, where parts still broke off and tumbled into the depths when the wind picked up. Not so the Avatar. His frown merely deepened for a moment before he broke into a run,

his armoured boots clattering as he raced down the stump of a broken support beam and leapt. He sailed through the air, over the gaping chasm below, and directly toward the portal.

Ami's eyes widened. It couldn't be! Was he really trying to get into her dungeon alone? He would make it, too! Ami's Keeper hand appeared in his path with a gurgle, ready to catch him like a thrown ball. His sword flashed twice in a cross pattern, and he burst through the glittering shower of water droplets, only to disappear into the two-dimensional gate upon touching it. "Darn it!"

With a whooshing sound, the Avatar emerged from the portal in the back of Mercury's command centre, startling the guards and warlocks alike. His mantle fluttered behind him as he disappeared into the pit, continuing on the same parabolic trajectory that had carried him through the tower gateway. He did not shout in fright, however. A clang from below announced his landing. The reaperbots leaned forward to peer over the edge, but instead of finding the intruder writhing on the ground with broken legs, they saw a knight standing ramrod straight in the centre of a spider web of cracks. Underneath his feet, the blue tones of Mercury's claim slowly eroded away. With a single leap that trailed streamers of silver light, the Avatar was suddenly among the scythe-wielding automatons. Controlled by their pilots, the two closest lunged at the enemy, whose sword flashed out in a gleaming arc. Pilfered from Ami's workshop, it was made of good quality steel, but that shouldn't have allowed it to cut through the automatons' legs the way it did. Amadeus calmly stepped between the two toppling guards, caused a third to freeze up when he stabbed it through the abdomen and right through the energy converter, and dodged out of the path of the fourth when it charged at him, only to help it along a bit further with a kick to the back. Metal clanked from the depths of the pit an instant later. His immediate attackers dispatched, the Avatar approached the centre of the room, where scrying screens lined the walls. An ice golem with red-glowing eyes appeared in front of him, only to shatter into its component shards before it could make its first move.

Having watched the recent confrontation, the warlocks, being some of the smartest dungeon dwellers around, immediately deduced the

correct course of action for confronting a living legend. Screaming like little girls, they pushed and jostled each other in their haste to make it through the exit first. Blinding light flashed and thunder clapped as lightning bolts out of thin air licked at the Avatar, only to be stopped cold by the blade swishing around him so fast that he looked as if spiralling arcs of light surrounded him. Despite the magical assault, he did not slow his pace. Cathy got up from the command chair with a conflicted expression, her hand on the grip of her own sword.

Snyder grabbed her by the shoulder, his chubby face pale. "Cathy, no! Are you insane? He's the Avatar, guided by the Light! We *can't* fight him! That would be like denouncing the Light directly!"

The blonde's lips quivered in indecision, but then she pulled herself loose and stepped into the clouds of Shabon Spray mist that had filled the ozone-smelling room. Flashes of blue came from the Avatar's direction as Ami switched to the heavier artillery and threw stored freezing spells at him with reckless abandon.

"More importantly, he's going to *kill* you! Cathy, come back!" Jered shouted as he ducked underneath a table to avoid a deflected burst of freezing bubbles."Fighting him is the worst decision you could ever make! Damn it!" His fingers moved to the daggers slung across his chest as his girlfriend ignored him and reached the exit before the intruder. She flinched as a frozen-over mirror clattered to the floor and ice shards pinged off her armour, but held her ground. She didn't pull her weapon though as Amadeus approached through the fog, surrounded by a nimbus of pale light. Instead, she spread her arms and blocked his path, completely defenceless. "Look, Mercury is a nice girl who hasn't hurt anyone! This is a misunderstanding! Just give her a chance!"

To Jered and her own relief, the invader stopped. *"We are merely going to imprison her, not kill her. Still, if misguided loyalty demands that you attack Us, do not worry. We will not hold it against you."* the Light promised. *"However, any such efforts will be futile."*

"Not to mention painful," the Avatar added in his own voice. He shot a venomous glance at Snyder, who was flattening himself against the far wall. "Filthy traitors." His next step shattered the sheet of

slippery ice that Ami had conjured underneath his feet, and he moved to push the blonde out of his way.

Cathy jumped back and closed the visor of her helmet. "Fine then! Mercury doesn't deserve such a fate!" Magic surged through the structure of her armour, providing her with more strength and speed than her body could have handled without the senshi transformation - for a few minutes, at least. She was a trained soldier, and the combination of powered armour and enchantments that had allowed Mercury to keep up with a similarly-enhanced horned reaper made the blonde a much more capable combatant than the barely-proficient girl. Almost too fast to see, she launched herself at the Avatar. It was time to pay back 'Marda' for all the humiliating sparring defeats. As fast as she was, Amadeus still managed to parry her attacks. To outside observers, it appeared as if the space between the two warriors was filled with falling stars as their weapons met each other hard enough to strike sparks. Cathy grinned underneath her helmet. She was feeling pretty good, even if she could already feel the strain on her muscles. She was fighting the Avatar, the greatest hero in the world, and had actually stopped his previously inexorable advance! The metallic clashes of sword against sword blended together, becoming a constant ringing tone that echoed through the dungeon. Maybe a little feint could get her ahead? Cathy suddenly felt cold air brush over her left cheek. What the- ? He had actually cut off a piece of her helmet? When? Sweat formed on her brow, and she redoubled her vigilance. There! Following a parry, an after-image of his sword darted down, toward her knee! The swordswoman shifted her weight, twisting the limb away from the treacherous blow. So that's how he did - wait, when had the right part of her helmet gone missing?

"Your sword does not look as if it will take the stress much longer," the Avatar pointed out, dispassionate as if he was talking about the weather. He wasn't even breathing heavily. To Cathy's growing alarm, he was right, too. The battered, notched remains of what was once a proud blade looked as if they would break apart at any moment now. How could she- "Yargh!" The blonde's world went upside down as a flick of the Avatar's own sword - still unmarred, the cheating bastard - took what was left of her helmet clean off her head. With it, he had removed the control mechanism for her

armour, and the remaining momentum sent her topsy-turvy as she stumbled over his extended foot and crashed into the wall, hard.

Turning away from the groaning heap of bruises and broken bones, the Avatar resumed his stride toward Mercury's dungeon heart. "Not bad for a mortal," he commented with a nod as Jered and Snyder rushed to their injured companion's aid.

As soon as the Avatar stepped into one of the larger halls, the metal portcullises at each end slammed shut, locking him in. Tiger, wearing a black senshi uniform, appeared some distance away from him, and stared at him with crimson eyes dimmed only slightly by the visor covering them. "Stop, please! I don't want to have to hurt you!" Ami shouted. With a loud grinding noise, her frozen Keeper hand pulled a sword five times as long as her enemy from the stone.

"Do your worst," Amadeus replied, continuing on unperturbed. His eyes glowed white. *"Rest assured that you will not be able to hurt our champion, no matter how hard you try."*

With a drawn-out sigh, Ami swung the over-sized weapon at him. It was a reluctant swing, since she didn't actually want to kill him. She needn't have worried. Amadeus simply raised his sword, angling it so that her massive blade scraped over his, rising higher until it passed over his head. Her visor dutifully registered the faint white glow that had appeared around his form during the move. Her next attack came in a bit faster from straight overhead, but he swiftly stepped aside and let the heavy sword bite into the ground. He was still moving toward the dungeon heart at the same pace as before. Suddenly, the room went dark, and the path before him twisted and curled, parting into five strange, meandering routes.

Jadeite's head and hands appeared in the darkness, larger than life. "Well then. Let's see how you measure up against the might of the Dark Kingdom!" Water rose from the ground, covering the Avatar's feet while lightning struck its surface. None of the beings hovering above it were affected by the conducted electricity, but neither was the Avatar. According to Ami's visor, the water wasn't really touching him. This hardly discouraged the dark general, though. The Avatar

swatted another strike of Mercury's oversized weapon aside, completely ignoring the curly-haired blonde's gloating. A forceful beam of water shot at him as Mareki appeared for a flyby attack, and orbs of dark power threw themselves at the white-mantled man. The area around him erupted into a chaos of fountaining water, black-coloured explosions, flashing weapons and silver light as Jadeite shaped more and more weapons to entangle, crush, or maim his foe. The Avatar kept advancing, dodging what he could, parried what he couldn't, and was inconvenienced by neither. Phantom blades separated from his real one, blocking blows it was too distracted or too busy to intercept on its own. Through all this, he still managed to cut down the quintets of ice golems that Ami sent to block his path.

It quickly became apparent to the hounded teenager that nothing was working. Teleporting in as close as she dared, she focused on her link to Metallia's dark power and opened the floodgates, letting the evil energy flow with reckless abandon. Perhaps her dark power would be able to somehow counteract the holy energies enhancing the champion's every move? It seemed to work, too. From the water covering the ground, grasping hands rose on their own, clawing at the enemy's legs. They were not cut down as swiftly as the foes before them. The Avatar's motions faltered for a moment, and a frown appeared on his face. When the next wave of ice golems threw themselves at him, they almost managed to distract him long enough for a swat of Ami's oversized sword to hit home. Almost. A casual stab pierced another ice golem in the chest, dispatch- its glamour dissipated, revealing the towering, demonic form of Rabixtrel with his scythe held high. Ami's eyes went wide as the cursed blade parted the air, darting for Amadeus' neck. His own weapon was still stuck in the beast's thigh, and with Mercury's sword forming a wall of steel behind him, there was no room to dodge. With a dull thud, the blow found its mark. Ami felt like crying. She hadn't wanted him dead! The moment of sorrow passed instantly when she saw that the Avatar was still standing and heard Rabixtrel's disappointed roar. A dull white glow was stopping the deadly scythe only a centimetre away from his thin neck armour.

"A shield?" Ami gaped.

"Protection and healing is what We excel at," the Avatar stated as light filled his eyes completely. *"You will not be able to breach our defences."* Idly, he freed his sword from the reaper's flesh by tearing it through the muscle, causing the injured and angry demon to retreat for the moment.

Ami wasn't so sure about that. Her visor told her that the Avatar's heart rate had picked up, and his breath was going faster. Blocking the blow this way had tired him somewhat, if not much. No, scratch that, energy flowed from the mantle into his body, reinvigorating him so fast that she would have missed this sign of weakness if she had blinked.

"Mercury, dodge!" Jadeite's voice came from the darkness. The dark general moved down his fist as if he was bringing down a hammer.

Ami teleported away instantly, and then noticed what he had done. A block of stone as large as a school bus had detached from the ceiling and was dropping toward the comparatively tiny, glowing figure walking underneath it. Rabixtrel took this as his cue to disengage at his best possible speed. "Jadeite, no! I don't want to kill him!"

"Holding back isn't working, if you hadn't noticed yet!"

Her gasp turned out to be premature. The Avatar stabbed his sword vertically in the air, and when the giant block touched its tip, it just *stopped*, obeying neither gravity nor common sense. A crack formed along its length and it split in half. Both parts crashed to the ground to the left and right of the champion of Good, leaving enough space for him to continue his advance between them.

"I- Impossible!" Ami gaped as despair welled up in her chest. "How did you ever lose the war with powers like that?"

"Treachery." Amadeus' voice had become cold as ice. "My mantle was stolen and replaced with a convincing fake by someone I trusted. The Keepers struck before the exchange was noticed, and by then, it was too late to do something about it!" His face was absolutely murderous. "Whenever I see that acolyte in your employ, it taxes my willpower to not slay him on the spot!"

"Er, I'll let him know to stay out of your sight?" Ami hoped that Snyder wouldn't faint when he learned that piece of news.

"Enough of this magical nonsense!" The Avatar's bellowed as he arrived at the fork in the road that Jadeite had created. A brilliant aura erupted from his body like a bonfire and spread outward, clearing away the glamour and slamming in waves against the black flames surrounding Ami. When it touched the ice golems, they screeched and turned into lifeless husks. Jadeite beat a hasty retreat when his shield burst like a bubble after stalling the curtain of light for barely two seconds. An instant later, the black shell surrounding Ami guttered out like a candle, and she found herself baffled and surprised when *Tiger* evicted her out of her body, using the force of her sheer, gibbering terror to seize control. The orange-striped youma darted away and climbed the wall in the far corner of the room in her attempt to put more distance between herself and the Avatar.

In the form of a black shadow, Ami shot toward an imp and considered just putting the entire room under water, but at this point, she would be honestly surprised if the Avatar *couldn't* breathe underwater. Dread filled her. The situation wasn't quite as bad as with Alphel's dragon, since the Avatar didn't actually want to kill her, but he seemed even harder to defeat. Darn it, she needed to stop making unstoppable enemies! Cathy had been the only one able to even slow him down, and she had hardly seemed the most formidable of the forces she had thrown at him. Perhaps... "Everyone, retreat for the moment! New plan!"

Divine Opposition, Part 2

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In hindsight, expecting the steel portcullis to stop the Avatar had been highly optimistic. He simply broke through the wall next to it, but at least he still ended up at the next obstacle on his direct path to the dungeon heart. A newly-built temple to Metallia shimmered in dark blue and violet hues, intimidating visitors with its jutting pillars and twisted skulls. The Avatar stepped forward without hesitation, his eyes and outline glowing brightly as he entered the nexus of dark power. The constant, incomprehensible whispers from the central pool turned angrier and more urgent as he approached the edge of the basin. His sword stabbed down into the liquid and struck with a loud tinging noise. From the point of impact outwards, the water froze, but the effect didn't stop at the edge of the basin. Tainted stone and marble pillars turned smooth and transparent, until the entire room appeared like a sculpture made of fine glass. A heartbeat later, it shattered like a mirror, and shards rained to the ground, breaking light up into all rainbow colours like falling prisms.

"Seriously, Mercury. Places like this are exactly what the mantle was originally made to purge. Did you really expect this to give me to pause?" Amadeus asked the black-armoured figure approaching him through the debris and carrying a long, two-handed sword.

"It was worth a try," Ami shrugged, "it couldn't do any worse than everything else I tried." She brought up her weapon as she got ready to attack. Her armour vibrated around her as she fed the fuel gems into its magical converters. She just hoped that she hadn't completely misread the situation. With a battle cry, she charged, using the greater reach of her two-hander to strike at him once, then displaced herself behind him to stab at his back. His sword was already there, performing a perfect parry that rattled her bones. In an instant, her slender form was in front of him again, and she exchanged accuracy for higher rate of attack. She didn't have more success than Cathy, but she managed to verify what she wanted to know during the quick exchange. Already breathing faster, she

disengaged with another teleport and shouted "I'll be right back!" before disappearing.

"Don't hurry on my account." The Avatar continued his journey, the destroyed temple's shards making crunching noises underneath his boots as he walked.

"Cathy, I need your help! I need the Avatar to remain distracted and in one place for a short time, and he only stops moving when he's fighting one of us!" Ami appeared next to the bed on which the blonde was resting, startling Snyder and Jered.

The red-haired healer immediately protested. "Mercury, I just finished setting her bones. I really don't think-"

"I'll do it," Cathy said, sitting up. "I'm not sure how much damage I can do in this shape, and my armour is busted, but-"

"Don't worry about it, he doesn't actually slow down because we challenge him, but because he doesn't want to accidentally kill us. I am nowhere as good in a fight as you, and he still did the same for me."

"Hmph!" The blonde's face went red, and she turned up her nose. "Oh, whatever. What do we do about the armour?"

"Take mine." Ami concentrated and appeared next to the standing suit of armour, wearing her leotard minus the skirt.

"I don't think it will fit," the blonde commented.

"I'll make it work," Ami said with a smile.

Robed figures in white, gold, and red leaned over a well-shaped marble basin, gazing spellbound into the vision moving within the pool. Anybody of distinction working within the temple was vying for a better position. Nobody wanted to miss watching the champion of the Light heroically take on an entire dungeon by himself only

moments after returning to power. Right now, he was exchanging furious blows with a slender female figure in necromantic-looking armour - the second such opponent that gave him trouble. A cheer went through the room when his brow scrunched up in irritation, which was followed by a quick horizontal strike that parted his opponent's head from her shoulders.

"Just another golem," one of the acolytes in the back row said, disappointed when the slashed-apart figure turned out to be a hollow suit of armour.

"Look! Keeper Mercury has arrived to deal with the problem *personally*!" An excited priest with a long, drooping moustache and matching beard mocked. He waved his index finger excitedly at the wispy, blue-haired female who had appeared in the Avatar's path, a sinister expression on her red-eyed face. The others shushed him for fear that the noise would send ripples across the surface of their scrying pool.

"Heh, she's no longer running away?" Baron Leopold took a bite out of the chicken leg he was holding, much to the chagrin of the surrounding clergy. "Praise the Light! She shall finally be brought to justice!" he cheered.

In the scrying pool, the Avatar walked toward the blue-haired girl, who started slowly circling him counter-clockwise from some distance away, her feet never touching the ground. Slowly, she raised her left hand, facing the champion of Good with her black-gloved palm. The Avatar's contemptuous gaze followed her, and he looked not worried at all. Mercury's eyes narrowed, and she thrust her palm forward. The Avatar's sword came up in a block to deflect the inevitable attack - only for the weapon to bang into his chest armour as it was pushed backward. He was thrown off his feet and went flying, still accelerating as his back slammed into the wall. Deep cracks spread out from the point of impact, clearly visible on the white-coloured stone.

"WHAT?" The cry of disbelief came from many throats at once, but abbot Durval's exclamation was the loudest. This somewhat surprised the elderly man, until he looked to his side. The boisterous Baron Leopold was too busy turning purple and coughing violently to

dislodge a piece of food that had gone down the wrong hole from the shock.

"Good work, Cathy! I think I got him now!"

The blonde was sitting on her bed as she heard Mercury's mental voice, looking down at a crystal ball on the ground.

"Snyder, you can stop scrying on the Avatar for me now." The swordswoman took off the helmet of Ami's armour and shook her blonde hair to keep it from clumping. She tended to forget that the armours were, in principle, just another reaperbot that moved in concert with its wearer. Like the other automatons, it could be controlled remotely. When fitted with a fake helmet, it would seem occupied to someone who expected it to be. Not that the Avatar had taken long to see through the ruse, but Mercury hadn't expected him to. Cathy just hoped that the teenager had made good use of the distraction. She noted that Snyder was still staring into the orb, and took a closer look. Her eyebrows climbed up to her hairline. "Wait, did she just glue the Avatar to the wall?"

Eyes wide in total surprise, the Avatar struggled to move his arms against the enormous force pinning him to the wall so hard that he didn't even slide down to the ground. His muscles bulged underneath the armour, but he could not lift one finger. To make matters worse, it didn't even look as if that accursed slip of a girl was straining!

His eyes changed to pure white. *"Admittedly, this is new. How are you accomplishing this?"*

"I'd rather not reveal that while we are fighting, sorry," Ami said, sounding anything but contrite. She just hoped that they didn't realise that she was using no kind of magical power at all. Her raised hand was nothing but a bluff. The Avatar's current predicament was all due to the huge electromagnet behind the wall, which she had quickly thrown together during the time Cathy had

bought her. She almost couldn't contain the giddiness about guessing correctly that, since the force acting on his armour originated partly from inside his shield, it would bypass his protections.

"This changes nothing! You still cannot harm me, and I will not be stopped, even if I have to rely on the mantle to simply outlast you!"

"Actually, I believe you count as my prisoner now," Ami contradicted.

"What? Never!"

Experimentally, she tugged at the Avatar's mantle with her Keeper powers. On a mental level, it burned as if she was reaching into a fire, but she clenched her teeth and persevered even as tears gathered in her eyes. With a final jerk, the resistance ceased, and the mantle disappeared from his shoulders. She quickly dropped it into a treasury before it could sear her more.

"Noooo! Give that back! Give that back at once, you thief!" Amadeus howled, his red face a mask of rage and despair.

"You have lost," Ami stated simply. "Without that artefact to reinvigorate you, your invulnerability will not last forever." Her Keeper hand appeared, balled into a fist as a not-so-subtle threat.

The Avatar's grimace of loathing melted into an almost exasperated frown as some glow returned to his eyes. *"Unfortunate. It seems that you have gained the upper hand for the moment. What are you going to do now, young Keeper?"*

"Well, I do not wish to kill him, but he's too dangerous to keep as an enemy," Ami said. What *should* she do with him, now that she had him? Armour creaked from the strain as the Avatar struggled once more against his confinement. "I suppose I could simply transform him back into a form that disables his powers and then imprison him, but that sounds cruel. Instead, I could let him go free, in return for a few concessions," Ami said, thinking on her feet. The Light was supposed to keep its promises, right?

"You would ransom back our champion?" the Light sounded more

amused than offended by the idea.

"I would rather die than be used as leverage against Good," the Avatar hissed in his own voice.

"We are intrigued. Speak, then, but know that there are things We will not even consider."

Ami nodded, letting out a breath of relief. Inwardly, she wondered what her friends would think of her blackmailing the gods of Good. "Well, most importantly, I need your oath that he will not take up arms against me or mine again!"

"Unacceptable. That would put too much of a limitation on Our actions in case we had to stop your aggression. There will be no general immunity," came the immediate reply.

Ami didn't like hearing that, but the objection was valid, from their point of view. "What about not attacking me on this continent, then?"

The Light was silent for a while, during which Amadeus glared at Ami with furrowed brows. *Very well. We promise that you shall be safe here from Our Avatar, as long as you do not abuse the spirit in which this immunity was granted. Attempt to abuse it for evil, and it is null and void.*

"That sounds good, but also ill-defined," Ami said cautiously.

"It is precise enough for those who are willing to abide by those terms," the Light contradicted. *"A more elaborate contract would not protect those who would search for every loophole from our wrath."*

Ami didn't think she would get a better deal out of them. "I accept those terms. Um, does he?" Amadeus, once more in control of his facial features, looked as if he wanted to do nothing more than rend her limb from limb.

"He will abide by Our agreements. You may let him loose now."

Ami didn't slacken her hold just yet. "But I have more questions that I need answered! How can I defeat a dark god to get my soul back?"

"You cannot. No matter how powerful in life, mortals have no power of their own in the realm of the dead." The Light's voice sounded apologetic, as if the deities regretted having to dash Ami's hopes.

"But Queen Metallia is in the Dark Kingdom, not there," Ami protested undauntedly.

"What?" the brilliance in the Avatar's eyes exploded like miniature suns. *"Explain! Leave nothing out!"*

For the next ten minutes, the teenager explained what she knew about the Dark Kingdom, Queen Metallia, and her interactions with them. The Light listened intently, asking questions whenever something remained unclear.

"The situation is dire. Once before, in a time so long ago that even the continents of this planet did not yet have their present shape, a race now forgotten managed to bring one of the dark gods into this world. One of Us followed the fiend through the breach it had rent into reality, and took the monster down at the cost of His own life. An age of sorrows followed as the world recovered from the aftermath of their battle. This must never be allowed to happen again. However, this tragedy produced a glimmer of hope for you. Adamantine."

"Adamantine? The same material Baron Leopold's armour is made of?"

" A metal not of this world, inimical to the forces of darkness. The powers of entities like Us or our dark analogues do not disappear simply because their wielder is dead. When the corrosive power of the fallen Evil seeped into the deepest crevasses of the north, that of his conqueror congealed into a layer of unearthly metal that sealed this cancer away from the rest of the world and keeps growing to this day. Forged into a weapon, it can even harm the physical forms of the dark gods."

Now that was something Ami could work with, and she smiled. "Thank you. That sounds useful."

"Be aware that challenging a dark god is an almost impossible task.

Consider how much trouble you had with only this tiny splinter of Our own power. You MUST cease sending life energy to this Metallia!"

"Does it really make her that much stronger?" Ami asked. Not that she wanted to continue sending Metallia anything, but she had always wondered how the Dark Kingdom's plots could be beneficial. From a purely quantitative point of view, most of Jadeite's energy-gathering schemes had squandered a lot more power than a human body could contain, even if you burned it as fuel.

"No, but she seems wounded. The dark ones' own power is unsuitable for healing themselves, and so they must steal vitality from those weaker than them to restore their patterns."

"Oh." Ami nodded as things clicked into place. Metallia's preferences for certain types of energy fit with what she had learned just now. Goblins' vitality manifested through extreme fertility, and dragons were large, strong, and lived for a long time. "Can you also help me rein in the corruption produced by my dungeon hearts, or at least turn it into something harmless?"

"The corruption's nature reflects that of the realm of the dark gods. Destructive, capricious, perverting, hostile and chaotic, it will actively resist efforts to go against its themes and to be put to good use. You could theoretically try to discharge most of its power by guiding it into blatant and powerful manifestations, somewhere where they won't do much harm. It is a topic We have not investigated very thoroughly, since We typically go for the root cause."

Somewhat discouraged, Ami tried an alternate angle. "Speaking about that, what about hero dungeon hearts? Could I use those to avoid the problem altogether?"

"The hero dungeon hearts, as you call them, are crippled imitations of the original design. In the process of purging its evil, We also removed much of its functionality. While still useful, they cannot support a Keeper's life.

"Oh." Disappointment flooded Ami. Had coming here been pointless, after all? "Could you fix that flaw?" she asked, not giving up yet.

"Unknown. If that task is indeed possible, you would be better served performing it yourself," the Light admitted, *"your own modifications to the dungeon heart were done more skilfully than Ours."*

"What?" Ami's eyes widened in surprise.

"What?" echoed the Avatar in his normal voice. Ami had let him go by now, but he still leaned against the wall with his arms crossed.

"Alas, no souls with knowledge about dungeon heart creation have ever made it to Us. Even as captured artefacts, they remain so filled with dark powers that they prove difficult to study before they incur irreparable damage. Any of Our modifications involve experimentation and erring on the side of caution. " A pause. *"Would you be willing to lend Us your notes?"* the genderless voice continued, its inflections reminding Ami strongly of classmates asking her to please let them copy her homework.

The young Keeper blinked a few times. "Um. Well, I suppose I could write down what I know for you, but it will take a while. And I want another favour for this," Ami declared. Not that she was unwilling to hand that knowledge over for free, but in her current situation, she had to take anything she could get. "I want you to relay messages from this," she raised her left hand, where her senshi communicator rested on her wrist, "to my friends home and back!"

"Out of the question. You are too ingenious by far, and this could be just what you need to guide you home."

"But I really want to talk to my friends again," Ami said, looking at the ground. Doing what the gods had suggested had not been her primary reason for asking, even if the idea had lingered in the back of her mind.

"That could be accomplished by sending them a crystal ball that you have never been in contact with," the Light offered.

"Really? Thank you!" Ami said with a big smile.

"I believe this concludes our business here, except for one more

thing."

"You want that mantle back, right?" Ami guessed.

"No, We have already started the process of creating a new one. You may keep it... Empress Mercury."

"Wha?" Ami blinked, dumbfounded.

The Avatar's facial expression eloquently expressed that he was dearly hoping that his gods were kidding. "Empress? Her?"

"The title exists, even if Zarekos had no right to it. Since you now de facto control these lands, it is yours."

"Err, thank you? But I-" Ami began. She felt overwhelmed, but mostly confused.

"It's unthinkable! She's a *Keeper!*!" A vein pulsed above Amadeus right eyebrow. All that rapid switching between facial expressions couldn't be good for him. "Why are you giving her that kind of legitimacy?"

"Because she would be dead within weeks otherwise," the genderless voice stated simply. *"Letting the Avatar go free and unharmed for no good reason? Inexcusable. The entire Underworld would howl for her blood for such a sacrilegious act of mercy. However, doing it to blackmail Us into granting her unprecedented concessions? Enviably devious."*

Ami blinked rapidly and paled. She hadn't even considered that yet! "T-thank you," she stammered, still off-balance. She would have bowed in gratitude if her glowing wristband hadn't warned her about unwanted observers. A Keeper bowing to the Avatar would send entirely the wrong message.

"This is less of a favour than you might think," the gods pointed out. *"It will make sure that your opponents take you seriously from now on, even those that were not inclined to do so in the first place. We can only hope that this will keep you too busy to conduct your perilous research.*

A small light approached through the tunnel that the Avatar had crossed, announced by scurrying footsteps. As it got closer, Ami recognised it as the lantern topping one of her new imps' helmets. The small creature gawked nervously at the Avatar as she approached, and made sure to keep her Keeper between herself and the armoured warrior. In her three-fingered hand, she held a rolled-up message that she proffered to the short-skirted girl. Ami took it and wondered why there were bloody tatters of a warlock's robe protruding from the imp's mouth.

She unrolled the scroll and read the message written in large, shaky handwriting produced by a shivering writer. "Keeper Mercury, I send this imp for fear of a telepathic message breaking your concentration at a critical juncture. I hope that it finds you unharmed. It is only with the greatest reluctance that I dare interrupt your business humiliating the Avatar, but the wretched Underworld army is on the move and demands the immediate attention of your superior intellect! -Torian."

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Underworld Army Attack

Originally on 2010-12-12T02:51:00

Trel, a goblin who was missing his left earlobe, squeezed the shaft of his crooked spear between his fingers so hard that his knuckles were almost yellow. The dented kettle he had hammered into a reasonable approximation of a helmet slid over his beady black eyes, and he pushed it up in irritation so he could search for an escape route. Barely a stone's throw away, a dense forest of stalagmites and stalactites taunted him with shadowed nooks and crannies through which a small, nimble goblin such as him could have sneaked away within seconds. Boxed in between trolls and orcs, he considered his chances before he caught movement to his left. There! A braver - or even more cowardly - goblin than him broke ranks and sprinted toward the cover. The string of a crossbow hummed, and the deserter landed flat on his face, a long bolt sticking out of the back of his skull. Trel's shoulders slumped. Bad plan. Shaking in his boots, he craned his neck so he could see who had taken the shot. Over the shoulders of the soldiers around him, he caught a short glimpse of a dark elf wearing a red-feathered cloak and a silly hat.

"Stop gawking and move it, scrawny!" an angry voice from behind him hissed, and a hard kick catapulted him forward. He jostled the troll walking before him nose first, and heard her angry grunts as stars danced before his vision. Trel ducked his head and tried to ignore the taste of blood on his split lower lip. There were worse fates than being among the front rows of the assault. He peered ahead into the twilight, where a wooden cart rumbled slowly toward the four standing megaliths framing the portal to the Avatar islands. Not only were the forced labourers dragging the vehicle even closer to the danger, they had to endure the darting whip and sharp tongue of its orc driver. Spittle flew from the pink-skinned creature's mouth as he shouted obscenities at the sweat-drenched goblins leaning into their work with all the strength they could muster, and his lash painted dark bruises onto their skins. Trel thought the driver wasn't putting his heart into it, since he wasn't even drawing blood. No

wonder he was distracted, considering the wagon's cargo. The large, square block of light-devouring substance - it didn't look like any stone or metal Trel had ever heard of, not that this excluded many - made mist condense out of thin air and flow down its sides, trailing the cart like a bride's veil. Trel didn't like looking at the thing much, since the unholy, glowing letters decorating the dark artefact made him dizzy. And he couldn't even read. With a sigh, he returned to watching the wagon's escort, resigned to his fate. The well-armed squad of leather-armoured orcs drew back as the wagon came to a stop in the centre of the portal's wafting glow. They threw nervous glances at the black block that now shuddered and slowly lifted itself into the air. The cart's driver took that as his clue to jump off his seat and run back toward the army as fast as his large-toed feet could carry him over the uneven ground. Chained to the cart, the wailing, panicked goblins strained against their restraints and pulled in different directions, unable to coordinate long enough to get away from the profane box now burning like a square piece of coal.

"Excuse me for cutting our talk short, but the enemy seems to be attacking," Ami said as she discarded Torian's note. She fidgeted and raised one arm in front of her chest, uncomfortable under the Avatar's fixed stare. "Um, would you consider helping me out with the defences? I don't think the army is fond of either of us."

Amadeus' eyes narrowed and the corners of his mouth tilted down. Ami worried she had insulted him, but after a moment during which he seemed to debate with himself, he nodded once. "The longer this siege takes, the longer it will delay my own plans," he growled and turned on his heel. Without another word, he started walking back the way he had come, toward the command centre.

Ami breathed out in relief. That was one worry less. *"Everyone, do not attack the Avatar. I repeat: do NOT attack the Avatar. He will work with us for now."* Employees informed about the change in situation, she hoped that there wouldn't be any unfortunate misunderstandings. As an afterthought, she plucked Tiger from the ceiling of the ambush room and set her down at her feet. "Don't worry, he's gone," she soothed the crouching, tiger-striped youma who resembled a bigger, horned version of herself. An instant of

concentration and a black flash later, the young Keeper saw the world from Tiger's perspective once more. Stronger, more developed muscles than her own relaxed as she unwound her limbs from the ball the frightened youma had curled up into. The body, by now familiar, still shivered randomly from the creature's recent fear, and Ami felt a slight itching sensation on her face and skin, as if she was sunburnt. She'd have to check up on Tiger's health properly after the current crisis was over.

When Ami flashed into existence in the command centre, the row of seats in front of the scrying screens was filled with busy-looking warlocks. The robed magic users almost fell over each other in their eagerness to show off their discipline and work ethic. Ami rather suspected that this sudden burst of motivation was intended to distract her from their sad display of cowardice in the face of the Avatar's invasion. Or at least to look more important than the others in case she wanted to demonstrate her disappointment by making an example out of someone. "Report! What is going on?"

Jadeite was hovering above the seated magicians, looking over their shoulders at the scrying screens. "So far, they have encircled a portal and are watching it from a distance while some sort of magical contraption is pouring suspicious-looking energy into it. We aren't sure what it's supposed to do yet. Good work with the Avatar, by the way," the grey-uniformed man congratulated.

Ami felt a bit warmer at the words and smiled up at him.

An instant later, Torian's face with its oil-slick hair obstructed her view. The warlock's even teeth were bared in a winning smile. "Indeed, it was glorious! I would not have believed it possible if I had not seen it with my own eyes, Mistress! The Avatar defeated with a single spell! How did you do it?"

"There are more important things to deal with right now," Ami waved him off. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Cathy enter through the door. The blonde was out of her damaged armour and back in the white sailor Mercury uniform she usually wore. Her disappointed expression mirrored that of the others of the room. Obviously, she

was just as eager as the others to learn how Mercury had managed to stop the nearly invincible champion of the Light. Ami observed the scrying screens through her visor, but the device couldn't make much sense of the shrinking, floating black cube surrounded by a corona of fire. Behind the glass was just an image of the scene in the visible spectrum, carrying none of the extra information that her sensors could have picked up. "Has anyone encountered this kind of magic before?"

A deep rumble from the parts of her dungeon that formerly belonged to Keeper Morrigan sounded deceptively loud in the silence following her question. Eyes widening, Ami directed her attention to that part of her domain, looking for the source of the vibrations. The noise came from her portal to the Underworld. Three of the tall megaliths forming the structure had toppled and slammed into the walls on their way down. The fourth only had escaped that fate because Ami had moved it aside earlier, rendering the magical gate impassible. Thus, it had not been around for the huge, black claw growing from its former base to displace it. Three more of the crooked growths reached toward the ceiling, arching towards a central point at which their sharp tips touched. Even the ominous blue glow of the inscriptions winding around the horn-like pillars couldn't drown out the brighter orange of a forming portal within the space delimited by the ebony claws. "Never mind," Ami shouted, "It re-opened our side of the portal." Her eyes stared unseeing into the room as she gathered up her reaperbots and rapidly deployed them in front of the compromised portal. Even dropping from a height of less than five centimetres, the automatons clattered impressively loud as they landed in a crouch and turned their knob-like eyes onto the new entrance.

"Get the troops over there now," Cathy demanded as she ran over to Ami's side and skidded to halt. She tapped a random warlock on the shoulder. "You, display the portal, now!" Turning back to Mercury, she asked "Can you simply shut it down again?"

Ami's borrowed face was grim. "The substance making up those pillars seems fairly hard. My giant sword is chipping pieces off, but it's not going fast. The claws seem to be regenerating some of the damage, too." Her frown deepened. "They are not flammable,

either."

"Right, we need to contain-"

A hush fell over the room as the Avatar strode in through the door, head held high and right hand on the pommel of his sword grip. The warlocks made themselves small in their seats and stayed very quiet as he walked up to Keeper Mercury. "Well, *Empress*," he ignored the surprised hisses of indrawn breath at his use of the title, "it looks like your visitors can't take the hint that they are not wanted."

Cathy nodded. "Yes, we have to make sure that they can't get the bulk of their troops through that portal." She whirled on the Avatar, her blue eyes flashing with determination. "Marda, or whatever your real name is, if you are going to help us then get over there and make yourself useful!"

The Avatar blinked once at being ordered around like that by the blonde swordswoman who knew she wouldn't last a chance against him outside of her powered armour. The warlocks stared at her as if she had grown a second head, and Snyder froze in the doorway, looking as if he would faint and drop out of sight before he had properly entered the room.

Cathy put her hands akimbo. "What? There's no time to lose! Either he helps us or he doesn't! Back to work, everyone!"

Jered shook his head in exasperated amazement and was the first to break the stunned silence. "Something isn't right about this. Tactically, it doesn't make sense to send your invasion force straight through the opponent's prepared defences." He leaned down to one of the diviners, pointing at the map on the central table "Check the other portals nearby!" The magician did as he was told, and found another set of blue-streaked claws on his first try. "Crap. I think that spell fixed *all* blocked portals linking to theirs." He pointed at the gate around which the army was gathering. Its blackened floor, scorched by the Unraveller's gift, was empty now. Of the cart and the unlucky goblins chained to it, nothing but lighter silhouettes on the smoking ground were left. Jered fumbled with his daggers in reflex. "We could be looking at over twenty possible incursion points, nine in the immediate vicinity of the dungeon!"

"They'll be able to get the most of their troops onto the continent, then" Cathy declared as she walked around quickly to the map. "We can't blockade all of them in time! I think the ones we should focus on are-"

"Of course we can," the Avatar cut her off.

Ami understood immediately what he meant. "There is a single point of failure for this invasion," she said, "Just not on our side."

"Oh. OH." Cathy sounded chagrined as she looked at Mercury with pleading eyes. "Please tell me we are *not* going to charge the enemy army head-on!"

Trel emerged from the portal, accompanied by a gaggle of other goblins and a few orcs. His soles felt as if they were on fire from charging across the heated stone, but his leather boots were merely singed. Cold air brushed over his skin, the feeling doubly intense due to the contrast with the sweltering heat that the Underworld rock had retained from the magic cube's conflagration. The gangly green creature stopped hopping from one leg on the other to look up when he heard a sound like an avalanche of heavy buckets bearing down on his position. His ears drooped at the sight, and he wondered just which dark god he had offended to deserve this. The other soldiers clearly felt the same way, and the advance faltered before it had properly started. Hovering above the incoming wall of scythe-wielding undead metal reapers was Keeper Mercury herself, her eyes flashing an awful red. She was flanked by a giant, disembodied hand. As if that wasn't terrifying enough, her real horned reaper sprinted ahead of her forces, maw open as he howled with bloodlust. It was a sight that would have given the bravest dark angel pause. To round off an Underworlder's worst nightmare, the Avatar himself was striding down the corridor behind the red demon, his sword drawn and outlined in white light. Even the most disciplined of the intruders froze in complete shock, their minds unwilling to process what they were seeing. The Avatar and Mercury, teaming up? Too simple-minded to be paralysed by the apparent impossibility, Trel screamed at the top of his lungs, spun around, lunged through the legs off the orc behind him, and ran back

toward the portal. Energised by his example, the rest of the troop turned tail and stampeded after him, dropping their weapons so their weight wouldn't slow them down.

Within the orange-tinted, wafting space that was shared by both exits of the portal, Trel bumped into one of the warlocks assigned to follow the initial group and counter the Keeper's magic. He simply kept going in his panic, and with a loud ripping noise, the warlock's hairy legs were bared to the world. He turned and raised his fist at the retreating back of the greenskin, who couldn't see because of the purple rag now covering his face. It flew off his face when a red fist attached to a round, bulbeous body stopped his flight.

"Deserting?" The bile demon laughed as he lifted the goblin off his feet. Trel's legs treaded air as he still tried to flee in vain. "I'll have fun with yo- ARGH!" With strength born from adrenaline and fear, the goblin took a bite out of the demon's leathery arm behind the wrist, his eyes rolling madly as he struggled. His left arm found the voracious creature's nose ring and tugged with all his might. Startled by the sudden pain, the monster let go for a moment. Without the demon's grip to hold him back, the goblin's pulling motion yanked him forward, and the kettle covering his head collided with the space between his rotund obstacle's eyes. He didn't even notice. Kicking and screaming, he clambered over the toppling bulk of his opponent. The bile demon's morning stars, attached with chains to his long, horizontal horns, clattered to the floor as he fell on his back. The orcs right on the goblin's heels didn't take the time to go around him, and his flabby belly wobbled and bounced as the fleeing troops stepped on it. Covered in many footprints and thoroughly miffed, the bile demon sat up when the stream of creatures cut off. He was swearing horrible vengeance when a shadow fell over him. As his eyes met the solid white ones of the maniacally-grinning reaper standing over him, he knew that his day had just become much, much worse.

Outside of the portal, the disorganised mob of retreating soldiers slammed into troops moving up to the gate to be sent to their own destinations. Shouts and angry curses echoed through the cave as frightened monsters tried to climb over their comrades and squeeze

through the densely-packed formations in their eagerness to get away. A large bile demon with an intricately-carved breastplate resting over his stomach stood next to one of the magical gate's monoliths, entering the destinations for the soldiers who were *supposed* to be passing through. A sudden twist of his head sent the morning star attached to the end of his horn scything through the legs of the deserters, tripping them up and sending them tumbling onto the hot ground. That was the least of the punishments he would inflict on them for cowardly neglecting orders and messing up his neatly-ordered schedule. As he prepared to vent his fury on the spineless worms, something entirely unexpected helped them escape his wrath. A glittering surge of water slashed horizontally over the tangled-up front ranks, looking almost like a giant hand. The force of the slap-like impact sent the foremost creatures flying over the heads of their comrades, enveloped in a spray of droplets. They crash-landed among the other soldiers, spreading more chaos and confusion. By now, the slow forward movement of the Underworld army had come to a stop. Its front ranks, thrown into disarray by the retreating forces barrelling into them, formed a dam that kept the rest back. The warriors hesitated not only because of the bodies in their way, but also because of the cold, obscuring fog seeping out of the portal. In an instant, the clammy banks of impenetrable mist swallowed the portal's frame. Silhouettes moved within, and muffled combat noise escaped from its cover as it rolled toward the troops.

"It's the enemy! Warlocks toward the front, get rid of that fog!" a thunderous voice rolled over the battlefield, coming from far behind the front lines. A dark angel rose above the masses, red eyes glowering at the unexpected complication.

Ami's five ice golems were the first of her troops to cross the portal's threshold. She was glad that within her Shaboo Spray, nobody could see her lookalikes make fools out of themselves. As soon as the ice girls stepped onto the warm stone, the bottom layer of their feet started melting, making the ice lose traction. Within seconds, the quintet slipped. Waving their glittering arms, the statues clattered to the ground and skidded forward, leaving a trail of broken rings from

their ice chainmail behind. Aside from sparing Ami embarrassment, the fog was also providing a lot of protection. The first crossbow bolts and enchanted arrows whirred past, aimed in the general direction of her forces, rather than enhanced with supernatural aim. Not far ahead, the ground was getting slick with blood as the reaper caught up with the stragglers, and Ami averted her gaze in revulsion. The Avatar wasn't far behind the demon, though the reaper's growl became angrier and louder whenever the champion of Light approached. Right now, he was sounding like a very large and angry bear. "Shabon Spray Freezing!"

With a few quick spells, Ami constructed a low ring of frozen ice around the portal's perimeter. While the barrier only reached up to her waist, the icy wall was slippery and should at least slow down the enemy forces while her reaper automatons bought time. With a gesture, she made her frozen Keeper hand reach through the portal, dragging a gigantic sword with it on the way back. She looked around at the magically-erected claws maintaining the gate and activated her visor to locate the weakest one. Startled, she ducked her head when a blue hemisphere flickered into sight around her, its surface rippling like a disturbed pond as a burning arrow pinged off it. "Thanks, Jadeite!" While she was glad for the dark general's shield, him being close at a time like this made her feel uneasy. With him here in the Underworld, right in the face of danger, she feared for his safety. She shook her head. She couldn't let personal feelings get in the way now, and resolved to complete this mission in record time. With a sound like a bell ringing, her oversized weapon struck the front right pillar hard, sending shards of smooth black substance flying. A quick glance to the left told her that the enemy was moving again. A wall of green and pink-skinned humanoids was closing in on her position, interspersed with a few large blobs of red bile demon skin. Most disturbing were the two slender, claw-armed females running ahead of the group. Ami winced as the first of the screeching madwomen in black leather somersaulted over the barricade, only for her head to go flying as she lunged at the Avatar with an extended claw. The second one ducked and let lightning flow across the long blades attached to her fingers. One of Ami's ice golems kneeling behind the barricades popped and sizzled as the arcs of electricity flowed into the animated statue and caused the water within to boil. Not to be outdone, Rabixtrel bounded in her

direction, and the dark mistress barely had the time to yelp in surprise before her torso split in two, cut by scythe strike that went from her left shoulder to her right hip.

Disturbed by the deaths, Ami decided to do something about the incoming horde right now before it could get its act together and swarm her with numbers. Closing her eyes, she drew upon her connection with the dungeon heart and urged it to consume a pile of gold from her treasury. She substituted the dark power produced by the operation for her senshi magic and cast another Shabon Spray, making sure that the stream of corrupted black bubbles shot far past the Avatar and Rabixtrel and beyond her improvised barricade. The acidic black fog produced by the spell mushroomed up and outward from the point of impact, and her ears immediately picked up the pained cries and shouts of creatures whose eyes and ears started burning. She hadn't made the spell as strong as it could have been, as its excessive cruelty went against her gentle nature. It wouldn't inflict permanent damage now, but still be debilitating enough that the enemy would avoid it. In a way, it was better than a solid wall. Immediately, trolls and goblins turned tail, coughing and rubbing their eyes and bleeding ears as they stumbled out of the dark mist. Another volley of missiles zoomed toward her location, but Jadeite was already at her side, spreading his shield. Satisfied that the situation was under control for the moment, Ami redoubled her efforts to cut down one of the blue-runed black pillar that maintained the portal. Another blow that rang like a bell, another chip in the rock.

"Warlocks, get rid of this fucking mist already! Attack them!" The dark angel in charge of the combined city forces roared, still taken aback by the audacity of Mercury to actually attack first. "What does she even hope to accomplish? You! You there! Dragons!" He pointed with his black sword at two of the large, green monsters towering above the rest of the troops. The long-snouted creatures turned to look at him, and one snorted fire from its nose. "Take off and flap your wings to disperse that infernal cloud!"

The dragons threw a long-suffering look at their black-winged general, but shrugged and lifted off, gales from their leathery wing

beats kicking up dust and bowling over the smaller nearby soldiers.

A shrill cackle sounded from nearby. "A closed portal."

"What?" The dark angel whirled around to face the short, one-eyed crone who had somehow sneaked up on him. She was leaning on her cane and grinning madly at him, revealing many gaps between her teeth. "The answer. To your question."

The general mentally backtracked, understood what she meant, and gritted his teeth in annoyance. That sorceress was such a pest, and if he had it his way, he'd snapped that gangly little neck of hers a long time ago to make the incessant cackling stop. Unfortunately, her political position and, more importantly, the fact that she was channelling power from her coven of warlocks to maintain the Unraveller's magic, protected her better than any armour could. Instead, he watched the dragons as they swooped down from near the ceiling of the cave in majestic arcs, spewing fire from their maws. His mood picked up as the black and grey mists both tore apart in their wake, revealing Mercury's black automatons. Even as he watched, a ballista bolt got stuck in one of the things, lifted it off its feet, and dragged it along back through the portal on momentum alone. This would be- "Witch! She's hacking at that pillar with a giant sword!" His frown was back, the furrow between his brows amplified by the curves of his horns.

"Gee he he he, I wonder when she'll notice that the more damage she does, the faster it will grow back?"

At that moment, a great cry of horror from thousands of throats echoed through the cave, shaking the stalagmites and stalactites with its intensity. The black-plumed angel whirled back to the scene of battle and saw one of the dragons struggling in the air, blood hosing down the troops below with each swing of its clipped right wing. What shocked the commander, however, was the armoured figure who had his legs slung around the scaly monster's neck and was holding it by its horns, directing its descent. "The Avatar! You told me that your warlocks saw Mercury defeat him! How can he be HERE? EXPLAIN!"

"Don't get so excited, you'll get ulcers," the crone answered as she

watched the soldiers in the shadow of the descending dragon run for their lives, panic on their coarse faces as they looked up over their shoulders at the plummeting beast. An instant later, the monster crashed hard enough that the vibrations could be felt even from her distant vantage point. The thrashing bulk rolled a short distance, hewing a red and sticky lane into the forest of demoralised soldiers. "Ouch."

"ANSWER THE QUESTION!"

"He's obviously decided that working for Mercury is better than suffering whatever other fate she had prepared for him, duh," the crone answered, shrugging her shoulders. "Look, he's already running back to her position."

"The Avatar working with a Keeper. That must be some threat she's holding over his head," the dark angel snarled and watched with a grim expression as the second dragon strafed the glowing figure from above. The beast had learned from the fate of its predecessor and remained as high in the air as practical, outside the jumping range of the obscenely goodly warrior. As it circled for another go, the steady beat of its wings suddenly slowed to a crawl. The Underworld general caught a glimpse of a horned, scythe-wielding figure in the fog who was raising his fist. Actions magically slowed, the dragon plummeted like a rock, unable to keep itself aloft. A moment before it struck the ground, the reaper blurred and leapt, swinging his scythe. The dragon's head separated from its neck before the giant body crashed, releasing a huge gout of hot blood. Rabixtrel landed on the corpse and screamed his triumph at the wavering soldiers.

Reaper. Avatar. Mercury herself. Her most powerful magician. Around thirty or so golems. The dark angel surveyed what his enemy was holding the portal with, and started smiling. Once more, he addressed the crone. "Cut your spell!"

"Huh?" The crone's remaining eye blinked rapidly, and she tilted her head as she raised an eyebrow at the blue-skinned humanoid. "That would be stuuupid. I cut the spell, the portal can be destroyed," the robed figure explained as if talking to an angry toddler.

"You insolent- look! That, right there, is all of Keeper Mercury's strength that counts! Her best troops! We are too far from her dungeon for her to transport them back, so when the portal collapses, they'll be trapped here with us with no way to escape!"

"I think you mean 'and then we'll be trapped here with them'," the crone contradicted.

"Nonsense! Without pressure, we can take our time and bombard them to death. If they leave that spot, we can bring the full force of our superior numbers to bear on them. They will be crushed!" The commander of the underworld troops gestured toward the formation of dark elves enchanting their crossbows on one side, and the dozen of magical catapults on the other.

Cackling loudly, the crone shook her head. "Nah, doesn't convince me. Have you-" A black sword tip appeared in front of her neck, a hair's width away from breaking the wrinkly skin.

"I could simply stab you and make you stop the spell that way," the dark angel threatened. "Believe me, I feel so very tempted right now."

"You make a good point," the old woman replied in a deadpan tone of voice. "Very well." She snipped her fingers. "The spell is gone, and so am I." With a poof, the small figure disappeared in a cloud of yellow, sulphurous-smelling smoke. A few oversized leeches appeared where she had stood and launched themselves at the dark angel in blind hunger. He uttered a curse, incinerating the vermin, and turned to observe the course of the battle.

"Something's different! The pillar is no longer healing," Ami shouted as she kept slamming her weapon into the shuddering edifice. She was uncomfortably aware of the bloody battle raging around her. Reluctant creatures were shoved to the front by the pressure of those further behind, into the carnage both the Avatar and the horned reaper were inflicting. Both had a wide, blood-drenched circle around them and stood on a heap of corpses. Where Rabixtrel whirled like a dervish, relishing each and every blow, Amadeus

stood still and unmoveable like a rock. When his sword darted outward, it was with quick, efficient strikes. Despite his economy of motion, the weapon unerringly found vital spots, and his targets dropped after a single hit. Ami didn't really want to think about what was going on around her, but the incredible noise caused by weapons clashing against armour and the screams of the injured and dying intruded on her thoughts. Her automatons weren't idle either, and she shuddered at the ruthlessness her goblin pilots were capable of when given the means to express their violent urges. With some difficulty, she managed to ignore the sickening stench of blood and ruptured bowel and continued hacking with her giant blade. This time, the cracks in the column spread farther, and an entire section of its substance splintered and trickled to the ground. The vast black claw creaked and wobbled like a tree about to fall. With the sound of a rock slide, it broke off and toppled, and the moment it did, the hazy orange glow within the portal disappeared. "Everyone, we did it! Evacuate now! Jadeite!"

The dark general shimmered into existence right next to her and thrust his palm forward. A black ellipse appeared, and he bowed, holding one arm across his chest. "After you."

Splash.

"Water?" Hovering in the air, Ami looked around wide-eyed at the ocean waves that surrounded them on all sides, then at her reflection below. Crimson eyes blinked back at her from Tiger's distorted reflection. An instant later, seawater fountained up next to her when the next reaperbot stepped through the portal and sank like a stone.

Jadeite, flying at her side, shrugged his shoulders. "It's not my fault that this particular Underworld location corresponds to some place above the sea. I couldn't know before actually opening the portal." He remained hovering next to the black ellipse that kept disgorging blood-smeared and dented automatons. The Keeper hand emerged next, moving backward and dragging a resisting Rabixtrel through by the leg.

Splash.

The horned reaper trod water like he did everything else: angrily.

Ami shot a Shabon Spray Freezing into the waves to provide some ice for him to hold on. "Sorry, I- oof!" The Avatar leapt from the gate next and latched on to her legs on the way down. She sank half a metre due to the unexpected additional weight, but managed to stabilise her position before she could touch the water below.

"While I could use a bath, I'd rather avoid this one," Amadeus muttered as he pulled himself higher.

Ami winced. Having a fully-armoured man climb up your body *hurt*, especially with the ungentle grips those gauntleted hands were using.

A moment later, she was giving the Avatar a piggy-back ride. A calm moment in the waves below allowed her to see just how ridiculous that looked. Despite herself, she giggled and hoped against hope that nobody was watching them right now.

"On the other hand," Amadeus continued as the arm slung around her shoulder moved higher, closer to her throat, "we are technically *not* on the Avatar Islands right now."

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Departure

Originally on 2010-12-17T02:19:00

"Still, attacking immediately without some kind of grace period would be bad form," Amadeus continued, gritting his teeth somewhere close to Ami's right ear. With Keeper sight, she could see his facial muscles twitch as he struggled to rein in his temper, even though his face was behind her. "I apologise for my rudeness, but I can barely tolerate the presence of a Keeper on an emotional level, even though I intellectually know that you are not the one responsible for what happened to my homeland."

The cold metal of his elbow guard pressing into the underside of Ami's chin disappeared as he lowered his arm. She let out a breath of relief, and immediately regretted the action when her slight change in posture caused an angular piece of his armour to poke her back harder. She may not have been in her own body, but even Zarekos had been able to hurt her while she was possessing someone, and nothing she had seen so far convinced her that the Avatar was any less powerful than the late Keeper. "I'm glad you didn't force-" She stopped and blinked in surprise when a dark blur whooshed out of Jadeite's closing portal, buffeting the cloth of his uniform with its slipstream.

The curly-haired general backed off from the black ellipse when something detached from the blur and hurtled in his direction. "What-" wide-eyed, he twisted aside just before the venomous green blast could tear a hole into his stomach. His concentration broken, he let the portal close.

"Jadeite!" Ami shouted in fright. She tracked the attacker flitting like a shadow over the waves, seeing wide-spread black wings supporting a humanoid body with dark skin. She dropped into a combat stance, swaying as the Avatar's weight on her back hindered her balance, and glance back at Jadeite from the corners of her eyes. Her breath caught when she spotted a growing gash fester on his uniform shirt, growing larger as the corrosive magic

rotted away its threads. "Are you-"

"Dodge now, gawk later!" Amadeus demanded from her back.

The harried tone of his voice prompted her to pay more attention to the dark angel rocketing high into the air. Wings wrapped tightly around himself, he was leaving strange, apple-sized spiky balls in his wake. Ami was reminded of Halloween decorations when yellow eyes and toothed maws lit up on the spheres. The lowest of them had stopped falling and were hurling themselves at her, letting out a high-pitched squealing noise. Somewhat confused, she swatted at the closest one with her Keeper hand. With a loud bang and a cloud of smoke, the hand detonated into a rain of droplets. Ami's hair stood on end as the rest of the missiles fanned out and streaked toward her. With a flash of circling snowflakes, she disappeared, reappearing a hundred metres above. She wasn't going to attempt any fancy dodging with the weight of the Avatar still on her back. An instant later, Jadeite did the same, reappearing at her side in a flash of purple light. Absently, she noted that he had discarded his damaged uniform jacket.

Two powerful wing beats brought the red-eyed dark angel level with her. "Well, Keeper Mercury," the sword-wielding figure spat, "you have escaped my army for now, but don't believe for a moment that I will let you humiliate me by getting away completely unscathed!"

"Who are you?" Ami asked, her hands raised defensively. "You can't hope to defeat us on your own!"

"Who is this 'us' you speak of?" the dark angel mocked, ignoring her question. "The Avatar and that reaper are useless here, and I am not afraid of any human warlock." He shot a glare at Jadeite, prompting Ami to drift closer to the shirtless dark general. "This is a simple matter of you against me."

"Careful," Amadeus muttered in a low voice, "his spells are still circling below us."

Ami glanced down, where the tiny explosives were ascending in a spiral pattern. "Shabon Spray!" A thrusting motion with her hands, and fog-filled bubbles shot down toward the enemy projectiles,

bursting to release a blanket of clammy mist in their path. Her lips curved up when lights flickered within the turbulent murk as if a thunderstorm was raging inside, accompanied by the bangs of explosions. Her satisfaction was short-lived, however. While she was distracted, the dark angel had pointed his black sword straight down. A brilliant flash of bright light drowned out all colour for a heartbeat, reflected and amplified by the waves. Crackling arcs of electricity stabbed straight down through Ami's fog and into the ocean's surface, causing steam to billow up with a hiss.

With a pained roar, Rabixtrel started sinking.

"Keeper Lightning!" Amadeus shouted next to Ami's ear, making her wince from the noise. Her hearing was already ringing from the thunderclap following her opponent's unmistakable spell. "Get us closer!"

"Please stop squirming like that," the young Keeper requested when she felt the Avatar's grip shift again. It almost felt as if he was trying to climb over her in his sudden eagerness to get at the enemy. Transposed by a blue flash, they appeared behind the short-horned creature. Ami felt herself spun around involuntarily by the momentum of Amadeus swinging his blade at the dark angel's neck. Thrown off-course by the tumbling, the blow went wide. It wouldn't have hit either way, since their opponent had quick reflexes and was diving toward the surface of the ocean already. Ami's Keeper hand appeared in his path, palm facing outward as if she was signalling for him to stop. The blackish blur that was their opponent rolled in the air until his wings were almost vertical and veered off to the right, nearly at a right angle to his previous course.

"He's fast!" Ami exclaimed as her disembodied hand swiped at him and was just as easily avoided as the first time.

"This is not the time to be impressed! Dodge those bombs!" Amadeus urged.

"Eh? Where?" Ami's head reared back in shock as she spotted the twin missiles bearing down on her from above. Her sly opponent must have hurled them up there when he spun for his evasion, hiding them behind his outstretched wings. Before she could

teleport, the first of the magical projectiles exploded nearby. Through the flash, she could see the Avatar's blade move like quicksilver, *somehow* cutting the explosion in half. The gale of hot air remained strong enough to buffet her and sent her spinning head over heels. That would have been nauseating enough even without the Avatar's weight clinging to her, constricting her chest with the death-grip of his powerful arms. Not waiting for the second explosion, Ami disappeared in a swirl of snow, reappearing much closer to the ocean's surface. Still in the process of steadying herself, she searched for her enemy. Where- another explosion drew her gaze upward to Jadeite, who was smirking as he somehow bounced his enemy's explosives off his shield and sent them into random directions, where they detonated after a few seconds. A moment later, his eyebrows shot up, and he hurriedly dropped out of the path of a greenish blast that tore through one of the expanding fireballs straight at him. Alerted to the dark angel's position, Ami transported her Keeper hand around him, ready to close its fingers on his upright form.

"Useless!"

The transparent hand grew milky white as it froze solid before Ami could form a fist, and the elusive angel shot out of the confinement with a single, rapid wing beat.

Ami had about enough of his game, and focused on a stashed-away Shabon Spray Freezing from her storage. So he thought he could dodge everything? The quivering ball of freezing energy appeared a hair's width in front of his face, lighting up his blue skin for the short instant before he passed straight through it.

Ami blinked. An illusion? Alarmed, she raised her hand to touch her right earring and activate her visor, and inadvertently bopped the Avatar in the nose. "Sorry," she shouted, embarrassed that this was the one solid blow anyone had managed on him so far. Her visor appeared, and a second image of the dark angel appeared near the first. *So that's why he's mostly using those indirect attacks, he doesn't want to give away his real position.* "Jadeite, aim to the-"

Both the real angel and his imaginary double closed their eyes and raised their hands, palms facing each other, and crackling with

electricity. Ami stared right into the twin blinding flashes when they erupted simultaneously, temporarily robbing her of her vision. "Arhh! Darn it!"

Opening and closing her eyes rapidly to clear away the specks obstructing her vision, Ami squinted at the sky, frowning deeply. Two could play that game. "Shabon Spray!" Magical fog spread through the air, impairing the vision of her enemies but not her allies. Since Jadeite remained in the area, her Keeper sight had no trouble making out the human-shaped blob of clear air zigzagging through the otherwise dense grey murk. Underneath her, water gurgled, and the blade of a scythe broke the surface like a periscope. Rapidly, horns, a red-skinned head, and wide, pauldron-armoured shoulders appeared as the young Keeper lifted her horned reaper from the sea. Steaming water shot from the monster's nose as he took a deep breath.

"Rabixtrel, he's all yours!" Ami called out, pointing at the moving clear dot speeding through the mist.

The dark angel glanced down through the fog, unable to see the reaper's fanged grin put any shark to shame. An instant later, the world around the crimson-eyed warrior seemed to speed up, and his wings no longer supported his flight. With a growl, he twisted a ruby ring on his left hand, and an egg-shaped cocoon of black feathers formed around him. When the wind blew it apart, starting at the tip, no trace of him remained within.

"Invisible again?" Jadeite asked as he

"No, he escaped," Ami said, sounding disappointed. Her frown deepened. "Darn it! His army destroyed our reaperbots still stuck in the Underworld while he delayed us."

"How many did we lose?" the dark general asked, crossing his arms in front of his chest. Which remained shirtless for the moment, much to Ami's secret delight.

"Fifteen." She snapped her fingers, and five glittering ice statues in her likeness appeared on the small floe bobbing on the waves below. Synchronised, they took an elegant header into the water,

glittering in the sun as they arced through the air. "They'll march the sunken automatons toward the shore, for as long as their energy reserves hold out," Ami explained, pointing toward the east. "I'll have to fish them out later. Let's go home."

Two teleports with passengers later, everyone was back at the dungeon. Ami was dripping wet from having to grab Rabixtrel, which wasn't something she had enjoyed doing. She'd have to be insane to like getting any closer to the demonic killing machine than necessary. "Cathy, what's the status on the Underworld army? Are we still in danger?" she asked, rubbing the soot and salt water off her face with a towel. Jadeite was nowhere to be seen, and she assumed that he had returned to his room.

"Their portal is impassable, just as planned," Cathy stated. "They have started tearing down their tents and are preparing to move." She grimaced. "I hope it's a long march to the next portal so we have time to recover and replace our bots."

Jered leaned over the map table, his wavy hair hanging down past his cheeks as he watched the markers. "You didn't fight in any part of the Underworld we have mapped yet, but if the pattern for portal distribution holds, the closest one should be at least two days travel away, at a minimum. Three is more likely."

"More than enough time to disable the other gates their magic re-opened," Ami said, smiling as some of her worries disappeared.

Cathy smiled too. "Three days? By that time, there might not even *be* an army any more. Their soldiers don't look too happy about what you did to them. I bet those who can will slip away during the walk will, if their leaders don't call off the operation in the first place."

Torian approached from his seat, his robe swishing around his legs from his rapid stride. His ingratiating smile wavered when he spotted the Avatar walk up to Mercury, and the warlock turned to the right and hurried toward the map desk, as if that had been his destination in the first place.

"Well, you seem to be out of danger for the moment. I shall take my leave, then," the Avatar declared with an air of finality.

"You don't have to leave if you don't want to. I'm not going to banish you from your own-"

Amadeus held up his palm to forestall her protests. "I am not going to stay here where everything is a reminder of what I lost," he growled. "Besides," his eyes filled with a bright white glow, and Torian dropped all pretences and dove into cover behind the command chair, "*We have already arranged for the necessary transport. Empress Mercury, you will find instructions regarding the second part of Our concessions underneath the mantle.*"

"I see. What-"

"EMPRESS? That's true?" Cathy stared at Mercury, her blue eyes wide. She wasn't the only one.

"Later, Cathy," Ami waved her off. "Avatar, what about your trolls?" she asked the man who had turned his back on her and was walking toward the hero gate still wafting in the air in the back of the command centre.

"I will take them with me, of course. I do not abandon loyal soldiers," Amadeus said before jumping into the glowing two-dimensional tear in space.

"My *Empress*, I have tracked him and the traitors!" Torian acted as if he hadn't just crawled out from his hiding place, and thrust his crooked index finger against the glass of his scrying screen. Blue-burning summoning circles blazed on the ground, one for each of the figures waiting within the tunnels of the troll island.

Ami recognised the arcane effects as the several minute long summoning ritual she had used to good effect a few times before. These must have been cast by a great many wizards on a different continent.

"Now is the time to strike! How are you going to destroy them? Lightning? Fire? Perhaps crush them in your hand like the ants they

are? Or are you going to slowly rend them-"

Ami interrupted his stream of suggestions, shooting a red-eyed glare in the warlock's direction. "I am not going to interfere."

The oily-haired man reared back as if struck, shock on his face. "What? He'll get away if you don't betray him now! Do you want that? He's the Avatar, the enemy of all we stand for! You have exploited his naivety admirably, but you can't just let him go!" Mutters that sounded like agreement came from the other magicians in the room.

"Can't I?" Ami answered, frowning at the robed man in a haughty way. She hoped she managed to put some menace into her tone. Who would have known that playing an evil overlord required so much acting? Maybe she should ask her friends for a textbook on it.

The warlock fidgeted under her silent stare and took a step back. "Err, that is, I didn't mean-"

"Silence. I shall explain my reasons. First, I have obtained from him what I came here for. Second, he also knows that I can defeat him, and will not bother me again. Third, my rivals," her lips parted in a grin that was backed with genuine glee, displaying Tiger's sharp incisors, "enjoy no such protection."

"Ah, I see." Torian's face lit up with understanding. "Forgive me, your Imperial Majesty. My hatred for the forces of Good blinded me to the greater picture. I bow before your brilliance." The short-bearded man did just that, leaning on his staff as he bowed deeply at the waist.

Ami felt a bit embarrassed by the gesture. "Rise."

"My Empress, if I may I ask, what other concessions did you squeeze out of these sorry excuses for gods?" the dark wizard asked, voice dripping with curiosity.

Ami raised her index finger and waved it back and forth as if chiding a child, but her voice was cold. "You may not. Some secrets remain my own."

"Forgive me for my insolence," Torian bowed once again, his face paler than before.

Ami inclined her head in a nod, then addressed the room. "Everyone, good work. Take a break for now, we will have a proper debriefing later."

Ami sat sideways in front of her desk in her bookshelf-filled study, facing a captive audience consisting of Jered, his girlfriend, Snyder, and Jadeite. "...and that's why they named me Empress of the Avatar Islands," Ami finished her tale.

"Empress Mercury," Jadeite chuckled. "I like the sound of that. I wonder what dear Queen Beryl will make of it?"

Ami blushed slightly. She was more worried about how her friends would react once they learned about it. She expected some good-natured teasing in the near future. In a way, she was almost looking forward to it. "Well, it was just a ruse to keep my enemies off my back. So you see, it's not a big deal."

"I disagree. It is definitely a big deal," Jered contradicted and shook his head. "I'd have thought that, as a Keeper, you would have realised how important territorial claims are. The land knows its master. I expect you will have an easier time here than normal."

"Oh?" that idea hadn't occurred to her yet. "I will have to perform some experiments," she acknowledged.

The wavy-haired man wasn't done yet. "In addition, it will give you more political clout than any Keeper in history has ever had. The other royals will have to at least pretend that they are paying attention to your diplomatic suggestions. They *can't* simply ignore your title without undermining their own legitimacy. "

"That sounds useful," Ami pondered.

"It means that when they declare war on you, they'll have to be polite about it," Cathy drawled.

"Ah, well, there might be an additional benefit," Snyder said. The redhead straightened his hair with an unconscious gesture. "While most codes of law do not allow for trading with a Keeper, there are no laws against trading with Empresses. Since it is customary for higher titles to override lower ones - and Empress is as high as you can get short of Avatar - some enterprising merchants with a poorly-developed sense of morality may consider your Empress status to override your Keeper status. At least until the courts decide to close that particular loophole, if they ever do. I do not envy the ones who will be tasked to resolve that legalistic tangle."

"Well, that sounds as if you need to get yourself a proper crown soon, *Empress*," Jered said with a wink.

"On the other hand, we have more pressing troubles," Cathy pointed out, her face grim. "With the loss of the trolls and the automatons, our military power is at an all-time low. Thank the Light we aren't facing any organised resistance right now. I strongly suggest that you cut the research time of your warlocks in half and send them to me for combat training. With our current troop shortage, we can't afford to have non-combatants." The swordswoman grinned at Snyder. "That includes you."

"They won't like it, but it will help in case of more unpleasant surprises, too" Ami said. "All right."

Snyder gulped. The redhead could predict great discomfort in his future from the mischievous glint in Cathy's eyes.

"What concerns me is that we can't replace the automatons without the trolls. Who, by the way, know how to build them," Jered brought up his concerns.

"They cannot replicate the enchantments without a properly programmed dungeon heart," Ami said, shaking her head. "They know how to construct them, but not how to properly animate or synch them up with a wearer. They may be able to copy the lightning protection though, since that's just physics."

"Ah, that's good to know. What's the status of the treasury, by the way?" the weasel-featured man continued.

"I wouldn't want to face another siege right now, but wages are secured for the next two paydays," Ami answered. "The unsupervised gem furnace model is working about as well as expected, and I could theoretically add more at an exponential rate. If we are left in peace for about a week, budget troubles could be a thing of the past. I will have to ramp up the decoys and misdirection surrounding the gem production facility even more, though."

"I certainly couldn't make any sense of that mess of tubes, glowing crystals, and bubbling crucibles when I had a look at it a while ago," Cathy said. "However, all the money in the world still won't help us with a lack of troops. I can just see the hostile Underworlders jump at the chance to let new recruits through to us. Provided we even dare leave some portals open."

"Maybe we should throw them a bone?" Jered offered.

"What do you suggest?" Ami asked, turning to look at the wavy-haired man.

"The vampires who plundered that city are still at large. Their destruction should satisfy the Underworld's need to save face," the brown-haired man said evenly.

"I- I don't like using lives as bargaining chips." Ami crossed her arms, an expression of distaste on her face.

"Keep in mind all of them are mass murderers, not only of other Underworld denizens, but also of the former inhabitants of this continent. They would only be getting their just reward. In fact, I am slightly surprised that the Avatar didn't go after them himself."

Ami closed her eyes, pondering this. That would include Nurgil too, wouldn't it? Being a ruler and making this kind of decisions was hard. "I will think about it," she offered.

Later, when the others had left, Jadeite returned and glanced curiously at the spellbooks and hidebound tomes piled on Mercury's desk. They looked like the kind of arcane lore that surface dwellers

would burn on sight - after checking thrice to make sure that doing so wouldn't land them with a nasty curse or ten. "Your Imperial Majesty, I'm surprised at your choice of lecture," he said, sounding amused.

"You can keep calling me Mercury," Ami said quickly. "There's no need to be formal."

"As you wish, Mercury." The grey-uniformed general took one of the books, flipping it open to a page marked with a green bookmark. His eyebrows shot up. "Demon summoning? An interesting way to deal with our current lack of warriors."

"No, that's not what I need it for," Ami looked like a child caught with her hand in the cookie jar. "I'm doing some research on getting my soul back!"

"Oh. Any progress so far?"

"I *have* a plan already, but," she looked at the floor for a moment, "nobody here would like it."

"Oh?" Jadeite sounded intrigued."Something that would manage to rile up both Light and Dark?"

"Well," Ami explained in a quiet voice, "part of the first step involves summoning Queen Metallia to this world."

"Yes, I can see how your surfacer allies would have a problem with that," Jadeite commented. "So far, *I* still like the plan."

"Right into an adamantine container to imprison her," Ami continued.

Jadeite sucked in his breath.

"And then chucking it into a temple of the Light so they can dispose of her," the blue-haired girl continued.

The dark general winced.

"I don't actually know if it would work. She might not have my soul with her," Ami pointed out. "It might not even be in a physical

location. This would be a gamble."

Jadeite cleared his throat and crossed his arms. "I'm not convinced the Light would be able to defeat our Great Ruler," he pointed out.

"I assume that they could figure that out before opening the prison," Ami answered. "In that case they could keep it somewhere safe and lock her up forever."

"Did you consider that, if she has your soul, and you put her into a goddess-proof prison, whatever tenuous connection keeps you alive might be severed? This could kill you!" He found the idea upsetting for some reason.

"I thought about that, too" Ami admitted, "but at least the worlds would be safe. It's a risk I'm willing to take."

"It's still not a very intelligent thing to do," Jadeite said, clenching his white-gloved fists. "I strongly suggest you come up with a better alternative."

Ami thought he seemed upset enough, and decided not to tell him about her backup plan. Even *she* didn't approve of that one.

Last edited: Jul 23, 2017

Musings

Originally on 2010-12-24T00:35:00

Ami's fingers brushed against the uneven rock to her right as she moved down the stairs, leaving three bright white streaks on the wall even though this place was no older than the rest of her dungeon. Dark grey dust covered her fingertips, clinging to her black gloves. The unnaturally plentiful substance dimmed the torchlight here, rendering the chamber ahead even darker than it already was.

She felt like someone in a horror movie and felt her hackles rise, even though she knew she was not in danger here. Cold, stagnant fog covered the floor up to her knees, making goosebumps appear on her legs. Her expression hardened with distaste when she spotted the real skulls affixed to the corners of the tomb-like room. Ahead of her, the resident vampire stood like an obsidian pillar, staring down at the open tome on the lectern in front of him. He was so silent and motionless that Ami might have mistaken him for a statue if she didn't know better.

"Your Imperial Majesty," Nurgil greeted her in an even voice devoid of emotion.

"Nurgil. I need the names of the other vampires who worked under Zarekos," Ami said. This was her first step for dealing with the vampire situation that was weighing heavily on her mind.

The black-robed vampire swivelled around to face her without moving any of his body parts. "You wish to hire my former comrades?" Despite the animated corpse's lack of expressive body language, Ami thought she detected a hint of disapproval.

"I want to be able to find them with scrying, at the very least. I am not going to put up with the hassle they could cause me if they felt like it!" Ami shuddered inwardly at the thought of ending up in a guerilla war against creatures that could teleport and change shape at will. Yes, she could keep them out of critical areas with water barriers easily enough, but nowhere else would be safe.

"Very well." Nurgil's eyes bored into her, as if he was trying to see straight into her head. After what happened during her last encounter with Zarekos, she did not dare meet the hungry gaze. "I shall prepare a list for you. Be aware, though, that the Underworld will not look favourably on you granting them asylum. They may ignore a handful, but more than that... "

"Just do it, please. I'll think of something," Ami said.

"As you wish." The vampire turned back to his work. Behind him, Ami disappeared, drawing streamers of mist into the void her sudden absence left behind.

Ami reappeared in her room and sat down on her bed. She wrapped her arms around herself as she shivered. These vampires were creepy. She hoped that didn't influence her ability to make rational decisions about them. Hunting them down promised to be troublesome, and allowing an Underworld party onto her continent to do it for her would be even worse. For that reason, she had dismissed these two possibilities. If she wanted a speedy resolution, she needed to get them to join her forces.

But then what? She was a warrior of love *and* justice! If the monsters had participated in the genocide of this continent's population, then they deserved, no, needed to be punished! Ami let out a long sigh and rested her forehead on her palms. It was very simple, in theory. In practice, she had a responsibility to keep those who worked for her safe, and the vampires represented an enormous amount of power. They were some of the most dangerous creatures in this world, as far as she knew. She wouldn't be surprised if five or so of the strongest ones could take down Rabixtrel without too much of a struggle if they worked together well. Besides, wouldn't it be hypocritical to punish the vampires when she carefully made no inquiries into the past of her other hirelings? Unfortunately, that didn't change that they were wanted criminals both on the surface and in the Underworld, her conscience reminded her.

Ami eyed the inert crystal ball resting on her chest of drawers with

longing. Three sheets of parchment inscribed with precise letters and symbols in golden ink nestled up to the transparent orb. The young Keeper had recovered them from underneath the Avatar's mantle. She hoped the Light hadn't minded her using a very long stick to move the silver-runed garment, fighting her revulsion to interact with it all the way. Her agreement with them only concerned the Avatar, after all

While the Light gods probably wouldn't hurt her even if she touched the mantle, having her Keeper powers suppressed for some time was not something she was going to risk. In any case, the beautiful golden script on the sheets spelled out instructions for a ritual that she should transmit to her friends. Once performed, it would pull a crystal ball out of a certain spot in inter-dimensional space that the Light had placed it into.

The directions looked simple enough for even Usagi to get right - on the second or third try, at least, Ami allowed with a smile. She almost couldn't wait to hear her friends' voices again. The problem was that the ritual was long, and it would take her at least half a day to transmit it correctly. As much as she wished to, she simply couldn't take the necessary time out of her day right now. Besides, why should she burden her friends with her problems? She would be the one who had to make a decision in the end. What would they think about her situation?

For a moment, she imagined their faces and realised that she already knew their answer in her heart. With renewed energy, she stood up, hands balled into fists. No more acting against her principles! She had gone far enough already just to survive, forced by circumstances. Right now, she was in no immediate danger. Keeping the vampires would be taking the easy path instead of the right one. She would not forgive those who acted like monsters!

On the other hand, she didn't know if all of them were guilty of atrocities. Her momentary enthusiasm waned as fast as it had come. It was likely, but she just didn't know. If she simply exterminated all of them, she would never find out, either. Thus, she was back to needing to secure them and interrogate them. Hiring them just for that reason felt perfidious, as if she was betraying some trust, but she didn't really have a choice. What worried her more was how the

rest of her employees and the Underworld would react. Would new recruits still want to join up with her if she was willing to turn against even such powerful servants? Nobody would still feel safe from her. Unless she could spin the situation as if she was doing the right thing for the wrong reason, of course.

Oh, she was making excuses again. If the employees didn't like it, so what? Her continent, her rules. No new recruits? She would manage somehow. She had before. Jadeite was already fishing for more youma. She could also find a way to construct more golems. Mercenaries, perhaps? She was an empress now - something that was almost as hard to adjust to as being a magical girl - and would soon be able to offer much better wages than anyone else. She had a feeling that at least the warlocks would cheer her on if she was forced to dispose of the bloodsuckers. They really did not like each other.

In a ship's galley, seven females wearing white uniforms that resembled hardened smimsuits sat around a big bin filled with yellowish bulbs.

"Argh, I hate this!" A fiery-headed young fairy with ruby eyes glared at the half-peeled potato in her hand and shifted uncomfortably on the hard wooden bench. "Ouch! Not again!"

"Are you hurt, Anise?" the blue-haired fae sitting next to her sister asked. "Camilla, Anise cut her finger again! Can you fix it, please?" She let her own finished potato drop into the bin and grabbed her redheaded sister by the wrist, tugging at the limb and shoving it practically in the younger blonde's face.

"You'd think she would have learned to do something this simple properly by now, with all the time we have been doing this," the violet-haired young woman sitting opposite from them said in a breathy tone of voice. Not only had she folded her wings neatly behind her back, even the discarded potato peels at her side rested in tidy layers.

"Shut up, Cerasse," Anise shot back while Camilla healed her finger.

"I don't need to take that from someone who baulks at preparing calamari!" The redhead put her good hand over the silver tiara on her head, swaying as if she was about to faint as she imitated her sister's voice and bearing. "Oh, I can't! The poor little tentacles!"

"But-"

"Girls, less bickering and more peeling," Dandel, the indigo-haired eldest of the group spoke up in a tone of voice that brooked no protest. "Act professionally, or do you want to be stuck in this place forever?"

Six heads shook in unison.

"Bah, I want to go out on missions again!" orange-haired Roselle whined, "this is all Keeper Mercury's fault!"

"Yeah, we totally didn't deserve that demotion for getting captured by someone like her," Tilia agreed.

"Oh, is that so?" A male voice asked from behind them, speaking loud enough to be heard over the sound of the door creaking open. The seven startled fairies turned to look at their visitor.

"Gah! Sir? I didn't mean-" Roselle backpedalled quickly. At the last moment, she remembered that saluting with the peeling knife still in her hand would be a bad idea.

"At ease." The silvery-blue-haired man was wearing the male variant of the white fae uniform, which was even more revealing than its female counterpart and left his chest bare. In the fairy sisters' opinion, it compared poorly to that of Keeper Mercury's curly-haired servant. Despite being about twice as old as them, the male fae looked boyish, being neither of heavier build nor taller than Dandel. The large jade earrings decorating his slightly pointed ears underlined his effeminate look even more. "You are in luck. It seems the higher-ups really did underestimate her, and are now coming around to your view. Which means that you will be debriefed once again. In exhaustive detail." He waited until the chorus of exasperated groans died down, and added with a smirk "at the Emperor's court."

Shouts of "What?" "Seriously?" and startled gasps echoed through the small room. While the others stared with their mouths open, Tilia took the opportunity to ask "Keeper Mercury did something spectacular?"

"You could say that. By the way, it's 'Empress Mercury' now." The male fae visibly enjoyed the slack-jawed expressions his statement produced.

"Impossible!"

"It can't be!"

"No way!"

"But- you- you can't mean-" Camilla went white as a ghost as her golden eyes teared up. "How did she manage to marry our Emperor? Wahhhh!"

The officer twitched, and his wings buzzed in agitation, spraying golden glitter against the walls. Wide-eyed, he stared at the young blonde. "Huh? What? No! Don't be stupid! She didn't! What gave you that silly idea?"

Camilla stopped her wailing. "No? But that would be the only way for someone like her to get the title, and His Imperial Majesty is the only-"

"Nonsense. It had to do with her plan on the Avatar Islands," the man interrupted.

"Oh? What *did* she want to do there?" Cerasse asked with interest. Her sisters fell silent, waiting just as attentively as her for a reply.

"Bring back the Avatar. She succeeded." Oh, this was so much fun, he thought, suppressing his grin as he watched the fairies freeze up again. He could almost hear their thoughts grind to a halt.

"What?"

"The Avatar is back?"

"Why would she-"

"How does that make her- "

"And then she beat him down with a single spell," the male fae continued. This time, he ignored the inevitable outbursts that followed his words. Inwardly, he chuckled as the redhead's potato dropped from her suddenly limp fingers. All of the girls were paling rapidly. "You can imagine why we are extremely interested in her right now. She then ransomed him back to the Light gods in return for her new title," he continued, forestalling more questions. "Now follow me. I'm sure you are all sick of potatoes by now."

"Cathy! Are you free right now?" Ami stepped out of the cloud of fading snowflakes her sudden arrival in the command centre had created.

Lounging on the command chair with one leg across the other and her arms crossed behind her head, the swordswoman wouldn't have been able to look busy even if she had wanted to pretend she was. "Sure. We have already finished disabling the portals that the Underworlders restored. Are the warlocks available for training now?"

Ami's Keeper sight shifted over to the iceberg, where trios of dark magicians stood around glowing magic circles on the ground, chanting with their arms raised. At the bottom of the ocean to the west, blue flames burned despite the water surrounding them. As Ami watched, two of her ice golems broke through the curtain of bubbles rising up from the ghostly flame, dragging an inert reaperbot between them. Without fanfare, they dumped the metal construct into the centre of the counter-rotating rings of fire and swam away.

Back on the iceberg, the faces of the warlocks became strained and nervous as their chant built toward a crescendo and their robes billowed in an unfelt wind. One fountaining burst of fire later, the magical circle was no longer empty. A cylinder of seawater replaced the air within the confines of the circle, containing the recovered reaperbot. The column of water instantly lost its shape, collapsing in

on itself and rushing outward with a loud gurgle. The warlocks were already running, their shoes making loud clanging noises as they sprinted over the metal grates surrounding the ritual site. They had barely taken a few steps when the flood swept them away, dragging them along for a few meters before it could all drain away through the grates below them.

The young Keeper shook her head. "I'm afraid they will still be busy for a while. I wanted to ask your help with something else, though. You know how to use a crystal ball?"

"I know the basics. Wouldn't it be better to get one of the professionals?"

"Not in this case. The reason is that." Ami pointed at Cathy's worn sailor Mercury uniform, still its original white colour. "I need to transmit something to my friends across dimensions, but I don't have the time. Since you can cast my Shabon Spray, it stands to reason that you have at least partial access to my mana supply. Thus, you should be able to contact them without passing out from the strain."

Cathy nodded. "That sounds so encouraging. Anyway, what do I have to do?"

"I'll show you what you need," Ami said. She pulled out her Mercury computer, which had already translated the Light's scanned instruction into Morse code for her. A few quick applications of the fabrication spell, and the swordswoman held paper copies of the screen's content in her hands. "Now, my friend Rei can detect when someone is scrying on her, and..."

Ami continued her explanations. Now she only needed to get Snyder, Jered, and the dark elves into the communication room. There, they should use the giant eyes on stalks to whisper convincing enticements directly into the minds of the free-roaming vampires on the continent and get them to join her forces. *I'm slowly getting the hang of delegating things,* she thought with a smile.

King Albrecht stood on the balcony of his palace and smiled down at the music-filled city sprawling at the foot of the hill below. He could hear temple bells ring loudly, as if they were competing with the instruments of the entertainers gathered around the feast in the marketplace. If he was younger, he would probably have joined the people dancing in the streets and celebrating the Avatar's return to the world.

"Ah, Spymaster," he said, sniffing the breeze audibly. "Does the smell of the roast make you hungry too?"

"I can't say it does, your Majesty." The other man, who had most certainly not been there a moment before, sounded astonished and just a bit frustrated.

Albrecht grinned into his beard. "Well, old friend, one of these days you might actually manage to sneak up on me. Twenty years of unsuccessful tries is no excuse to give up."

"You are in a good mood today, Sire."

"Of course I am!" Albrecht let go of the railing and faced the cowled spy. "I'm just as happy as everyone else that the Avatar is back. More so, since I'm aware of what really happened over there. I almost had a heart attack when Keeper Mercury just flung him into the wall with a simple gesture."

"If that had happened, you would have been in a room filled with high-ranking priests, at least," the spymaster said in a dry tone of voice. Tiny wrinkles visible around his eyes denoted that he was speaking in jest.

"True. The conclusion to their altercation was almost as much of a shock. Empress. A Keeper." Albrecht shook his head as if in disbelief. "And they remained on good enough terms that he assisted her with the defence of her dungeon, too."

"That might have been part of the extorted agreement," the spymaster speculated. "In any case, a certain degree of pragmatism is to be expected from someone who teams up with trolls."

King Albrecht went inside and drew the red curtains shut behind him. "He managed to convert those trolls, too. I wonder how they are enjoying the beaches of Kalega?" He lifted a sleeping kitten out of his armchair before sitting down. The animal blinked, meowed once, and settled down on his lap, purring as he started stroking its back.

"Kalega, your Majesty?" Court wizard Dumat, who had only caught the tail end of the conversation, was perusing the bookshelves in the back of the room.

Albrecht nodded. "A tropical island nation just off the east coast. Famous for sun, beaches, fruit, and friendly locals. It also has a minor Keeper problem."

"Nothing that would at first glance warrant the Avatar's attention. Keeper Peran has made a petty nuisance out of himself for the last fifty years, but the local forces never had much trouble with his incursions." The spymaster was flipping through his notes as he continued. "If I was prone to speculation, I would assume that the Light decided that he needs a vacation."

"If anyone does, it's him," Albrecht nodded and let out a long breath. "Well, with Mercury now holding the title of Empress of the Avatar Islands, the Light has made it pretty much official that they consider the place lost to the darkness for good. At least her reason for travelling to that wasteland is now in the open. I certainly didn't expect anything as stunningly brash as that."

"I could not have predicted this either, which worries me," the spymaster pointed out. "We had no indication that the Avatar's power still existed, or that he was still alive. Yet, the dark empress' knowledge was solid enough for her to commit to that course of action. That indicates that she has an information network even better than our own. Worst of all, *it remains completely undiscovered by my sources so far.* I also have not yet been able to discover how she finances her expansion."

"She probably just conjures all her wealth up from thin air," Dumat said. "We already know that her magical reserves are insane from the amount of golems she was able to deploy."

"All in all, that paints a fairly terrifying picture." Albrecht gently stopped the kitten from climbing up his ermine pelt stole. "Still, she has rendered us a great service by returning the Avatar into play."

"She probably doesn't think that way, since she can easily defeat him," the court wizard said, shuddering. "This makes me question whether working on a spell to summon her is a wise idea. Should I cancel that project, your Majesty?"

"Hmm. Spymaster?"

Pages rustled as the masked man consulted his ever-present notes. "My agents interrogated many witnesses of the Avatar's intrusion into the dark empress' dungeon. While none of the diviners were able to see through the magical darkness that obscured part of the battle, the end was observed by all. An analysis of the data suggests that engaging her in combat remains feasible. She kept pointing her palm at the Avatar while she pinned him to the wall, indicating that this power requires constant concentration. It is very likely that she cannot maintain it on more targets than she has limbs, so superior numbers should definitely work."

"Unless she keeps her tentacle monster around for more than the obvious reasons," Dumat interjected.

"I see." Albrecht sat up in his chair. "Given how dangerous she is, even a spell that would merely summon her away and prevent her from personally defending her dungeon hearts could be invaluable. It might, in fact, be the only way to stop her. Dumat, continue your research with all due haste."

Last edited: Oct 17, 2016

Vampire Solution

Originally on 2011-01-01T02:08:00

Vampire Darius could say with perfect certainty that he hated travelling by sea. In the form of a large bat, he was alive enough to survive crossing the ocean without ill effects. Unfortunately, being alive also meant he had to put up with the natural frailties of the living. Shivering in discomfort, he tightened his wings around himself and curled up into a ball. He wished the scraps of old curtain he had padded this wooden box with were warmer. While he was at it, he also wished that the tar pitch he had caulked the small container with would stop assaulting his nose with its stench. At least, it was keeping out the salty spray pattering against the walls of his tiny abode.

"Why can't these useless ghosts pull harder?" he asked nobody in particular. The five dominated spectres were already dragging his improvised raft toward the west as fast as they could. Well, he shouldn't complain, he thought. With the death of his sire, Zarekos, he was free of the vampire lord's command to remain within his realm, and he had even found a way off the Avatar Islands on his own. Keeper Mercury had unwittingly shown him how when she arrived on her iceberg. He couldn't find enough wood to make a real ship, but could manage freezing spells just fine. Crossing the ocean within a crate on top of a bobbing ice floe wasn't fun, but he could deal with temporary discomfort if it meant his freedom and independence, not to mention escaping from the Underworld forces out for his blood.

His feeling of satisfaction came crashing down when a flying object entered the range of his echolocation. A Shining Concord flying carpet, here? That couldn't be coincidence! He screeched out a stream of vile curses when smaller, insect-winged forms detached from it. He didn't know how they could have found him, but he didn't believe in coincidences. With a sudden flurry of activity, he forced his way through the hatch built into the top of his box and flapped his wings furiously, darting away from his vessel at the best speed his

tiny form could manage.

Cowardly? Yes. Well-justified? Very. The fairies made a beeline for the icy raft. Flickering blue light lit up the wave crests between which he was hiding as the attackers quickly dispatched his ghostly minions with lightning. He didn't even look back. A few loud booms, hisses, and orange flashes later, he knew that the blockade team was very thorough. If he had still been hiding in his box in the hopes of being overlooked, the attackers' fireballs would have incinerated him when they melted the ice vessel into nothingness.

Scared and frustrated, he set course back to the Avatar Islands. His existence could have ended there! Even if they didn't chase him, he was still in peril. He hoped that this body had enough stamina to make it back to the mainland. If he fell prey to exhaustion and drowned in this form, he would be just as dead as if he tried to cross the waters in his natural form. His plans thwarted, he considered his future options during the long journey back to safe land. Maybe he should respond to Keeper Mercury's recruitment offer if he made it back in one piece?

"Your Majesty, a representative from the Silver Hawks is requesting an audience to discuss some contracts," an aide wearing a red livery embroidered with roaring lions announced, bowing in front of King Albrecht's throne.

The wizened Monarch stroked his beard in thought and raised a grey eyebrow. "Unusual. I am unaware of any bounties that the kingdom placed recently."

"He mentioned that it was urgent, Sire."

"It always is," Albrecht said, chuckling into his beard. "Very well, let's hear him out."

The man who entered through the double doors, flanked by two halberd-wielding guards, was wearing a long leather coat emblazoned with a flying hawk on the chest. The ends of his thin black moustache whipped toward the ground as he bowed crisply

some distance from the throne. "Your Majesty. I am Vernol, Grand Secretary of the Silver Hawks."

"Rise." Albrecht motioned the man closer and held out his open hand to receive the documents that the other was removing from his scroll case. "What brings you here?"

"Well," The man looked somewhat uncomfortable. "My employers found it prudent, in light of recent events, to suspend these contracts," he handed them over, "until you had the opportunity to review them."

"That is highly irregular," Albrecht said in a gruff tone of voice as he unrolled the scrolls. "Why would- oh my." His eyes widened slightly, and he grimaced. "Yes, the political and legal implications of a bounty on the head of an empress and her associates would be cause for concern, even if she is also a Keeper. Thanks for bringing this to my attention."

Jered smirked when he strode in through the door. "We have lured in three more vampires, your Majesty. They are outside, waiting to be hired."

"Please, call me Mercury when we are in private," Ami said. He imagined that she would have blushed if she hadn't been possessing an ice body at the moment. "I don't feel like an empress." She took three gold coins from the stack resting next to her Mercury computer and disappeared from her seat.

Jered could sympathise with the feeling. He hadn't properly internalised yet that he was now working directly underneath an empress. Him! To think that the strange, naive Keeper who had hired him almost on accident would come so far. He shook his head in wonder, making his wavy hair brush against his cheeks. He would have to be extra nice to Cathy to reward her for convincing him to stick with Mercury in the beginning. Maybe a present?

The weasel-featured man's thoughts drifted for a moment as he considered some options before returning to his reason for his good

mood. While Mercury was hated and feared as a Keeper, her title was as legitimate as it could get. Any titles she chose to bestow unto her subjects once she got around to formalise the structure of her empire would be just as legitimate. He'd have to gently make her aware that she had that option. He was effectively fulfilling the role of her treasurer, and if any of Mercury's subjects deserved the title of Baron, it was Cathy. And here he had thought that all his ambitions had died an abrupt death when he had become associated with the blue-haired girl. Things were looking up, he thought. Now if Mercury would only manage to do something about the near-constant mortal peril that followed her wherever she went...

"...so you see, I feel that they *have* to be punished for their crimes, but I don't want to be judge jury and executioner," Ami finished explaining to Snyder, Cathy, and Jered, who sat across her from the table in the living room. Now that the vampires were actually wandering around in a catacomb-like section of her dungeon, her earlier determination had been replaced by nagging insecurity. "It's not that I don't want to bring them to justice, it's that I don't feel comfortable deciding what should happen to them. Killing an enemy in battle is one thing, but sentencing prisoners..." Ami trailed off and took a long sip from the cup of tea standing before her as she collected her thoughts. "Besides, when I hired them, they couldn't have know that I would disapprove of their past misdeeds."

"Which does not excuse their crimes in the slightest. Seriously, I don't see why you are having an attack of bad conscience over this. Sure, you deceived a bunch monsters to lure them into a trap. Good job! You just prevented unnecessary losses among the good guys and stopped them from going into hiding, just as you wanted." Jered sounded genuinely confused by Mercury's misgivings.

"All of them were eager to join up, even after being first in Zarekos', then Wemos' employ?" Cathy asked, her voice dubious.

"About half of them were reluctant before Mercury transmitted them a message of her own," the wavy-haired man said with a grin. "She told them that she wasn't going to tolerate any free agents on her lands, and that she would send the vampires who *did* join up after

those individuals that didn't. They trickled in fairly quickly after she started reading the missing names from a list."

"Good thinking. It's so comforting to know they are no longer roaming the countryside, and roaming this dungeon instead."

Snyder paid no attention to the blonde's sarcasm and looked into Ami's eyes. "Mercury, there is a rather simple solution to your problem. You do not want to set arbitrary or whimsical punishments, and you do not need to. You can simply apply the appropriate punishments that existed for their crimes at the time they were committed. The vampires would most certainly have broken the laws of this land during the invasion. Technically, you have inherited this realm, and they would still be in effect since you never adjusted them."

"Hmm." Ami's expression brightened as she figuratively leapt at the offered solution. "That isn't a bad idea at all. If I got a copy of the Avatar Islands' code of laws from somewhere, I could officially reinstate-"

"No. That's a horrible idea," Jered interrupted immediately, holding up both hands. "We want to get the Underworlders off our back, not give them more reasons to go after you! Applying surface law here would definitely be seen as defection!"

"I think coming up with a code of laws of your own would be a good idea, now that you are an Empress," Cathy said quickly when Mercury's face fell. "If your laws remained focused mainly on maintaining order in your lands, you could get away with a lot while keeping the impression that they are value-neutral."

Ami nodded along slowly, but she was only half-listening to the blonde's words. In her mind, a new plan was taking shape. Now, what had been the name of that magical peddler who had contacted her during her first days in this world. Nicodemus something?

"... and we'd suspend them upside down so the blood would shoot to their heads and keep them conscious longer. Good times." the

vampire's mental voice was tinged with nostalgia as he failed to pick up on the horror and searing rage that the tales of his exploits were evoking in the passenger possessing his body.

"BE QUIET! I have heard enough! Ami bellowed in his mind, feeling sickened already after his first three sentences. Nothing was embellished or exaggerated either, she knew. While she didn't have any truth-finding arcane patterns, it wasn't possible to lie to her within the suspect's mind itself. She only wished this vampire and his many predecessors had been lying. *At least, I don't have to see the relevant memories this way,* she thought as she fought to reign in both her temper and the urge to slay this monster on the spot. Someone harming children always was the fastest way to make her seethe with anger. However, she would stick to the plan, and not impulsively stuff this beast down the Avatar's mantle as it rightly deserved. With the mental equivalent of a brutal shove, she pushed the vampire's control over his body aside and turned into a bat. Even with the instinctive knowledge how to do it, it was an incredibly weird sensation, no matter how often she repeated that transformation. From experimentation, she knew that the bloodsucking monstrosities didn't have access to their powers as long as they were in this living form, and she blocked out the vampire's babbling in the back of her mind as she transported their shared body into a tiny cage surrounded by water.

An instant later, she had left the small mammal behind and was back on her stone throne. Now in her true form, she gulped in air with deep, calming breaths, clutching her hands to keep them from shaking in anger. *Only three more to go,* she reminded herself.

The next vampire dropped into the room, momentarily startled. Ami saw the red-robed figure cringe and drop to his knees the moment he spotted her expression. She wasn't particularly surprised by his reaction, since she could see the faint shadow the vampire was casting on the ground due to the crimson glow of her eyes. With the way the dark energy swirling around her was corroding the stone, she'd need to replace her throne once this was over. Before the vampire even dared raise his gaze to meet hers, she turned into crackling blackness and sank into his body.

"Name?" she asked in his mind.

"D-Darius," the vampire responded, taken aback by the sudden intrusion.

"Do you have a graveyard to revive in somewhere?"

"No, your Imperial Majesty," Darius replied quickly.

Ami felt no deception from him. *"When did you arise from the grave?"* As soon as she had asked the question, she felt a surge of panic from her host.

"D-during the g-great famine after Mukrezar's v-victory," he stuttered, his thoughts informing Ami that he thought she was only interested in old, experienced vampires.

In a way, that was even true. Ami ended the possession. "Thank you, I have heard enough." She felt slightly calmer now. This bloodsucker had not yet existed during the time of the massacres."You may feed on the dead imps in the next room if you are hungry."

"Thank you, yo-" Darius disappeared as Ami impatiently sent him away and plopped down back on her eroded throne, eager to get the rest of this draining series of interviews over with.

The muscular, short-bearded man lying on the beach and enjoying the afternoon sun felt the temperature drop when a shadow fell over him.

"Lord Avatar?"

Amadeus opened one eye and let his gaze wander up the tanned legs before him until they disappeared underneath a slitted skirt coloured white and gold. The Kalegan priestess who had woken him was wearing much less than he was used to from clergy, but still more than most fairies he had known. Given the tropical climate, that didn't surprise him. He steadied his elbows in the sand and sat up slowly. "Yes? Sister Arika, was it?"

The black-haired woman nodded and wrung her hands. "I am so

sorry to disturb your rest, Lord Avatar, but something came up that requires your attention. There is, well, a large crate was delivered magically, addressed to you." She looked over her shoulder back to the white marble tower crowning a cliff that jutted out into the sea. "It's from Kee- Empress Mercury," she blurted out in a hurry.

"I see. Not entirely unexpected, she was supposed to send something." The Avatar stood up and sipped from the goblet filled with cool fruit juice resting on a smoothed rock next to him. *Though I would have thought she would simply send her dungeon heart notes to the nearest temple instead of bothering me.* "It contains books?"

"No. I mean, probably not. If the note attached to it is to be believed." Arika wrung her hands again. "Err, it says, 'DANGER, READ THIS FIRST' in huge red letters," the priestess quoted. "'Contents: 31 ravenous vampires'."

Amadeus choked on his drink and spewed the reddish liquid from his nostrils. Once he had regained control over his breathing, he asked incredulously "Say what?"

"It goes on to read 'in bat form, caged, surrounded with walls of water'," the woman continued. "We weren't exactly eager to open it after reading that."

The Avatar was already stalking off toward the tower, motioning to the trolls lounging underneath the palm trees to follow him. "I'll have a look at this immediately. Oh, and if the conveyor of the package is still available, I have something I want to send back to Mercury."

"Your crate has been delivered and accepted, Great Empress," Nicodemus Asbraxe said to the glowing crystal ball on his table. Despite the ring of fat surrounding his stomach getting in the way, the smuggler was bowing so deeply that most of the mangy beard protruding from underneath his hood rested on his carpet, next to a coffee stain.

"Good. Here is the second part of your payment," the young-sounding female voice from the orb replied. Within the blossom-like

summoning diagram decorating the trader's floor, a stack of gold coins appeared. He couldn't help but drool a little at the sight, momentarily ignoring the terror the deceptively innocent-looking creature, for whom he had just moved some cargo, inspired in him. It was almost enough to get him over his disappointment that she *hadn't* forgotten his existence.

While he was curious about what she had sent to the *Avatar himself*, he hadn't even attempted to find out. If someone who molested horned reapers and beat up the Avatar for fun told him that he would die if he messed with something, he listened like he had never listened before. It probably had been a trap for that do-gooder, anyway. He hoped nobody would try to track him down for his participation in this. "Your Imperial Majesty, there is something else. The Avatar," he gulped, "wanted you to have this object in return. I am transmitting it now."

With some sense of relief, he watched the small, bent piece of metal shimmer green and disappear. He had not detected any magic from the small item, and it seemed perfectly normal. Still, the mere fact that it was something the *Avatar* sent to a *Keeper* meant that Nicodemus wanted to be rid of it yesterday. Glancing at his crystal ball, he immediately saw that his caution had been warranted. For some reason not discernible to him, the dark empress had gone white as a sheet, staring at the horseshoe magnet as if it was a poisonous snake.

Disagreements

Originally on 2011-01-06T23:05:00

Ami sat silently on her throne and let her gaze wander over the twelve dark-robed vampires that remained after she had sorted out the guilty ones. Nurgil was no longer among the group, and her eyes narrowed slightly at the memories of the atrocities the monster had confessed so easily in his own mind. Lined up some distance away from her, the five women and seven men started fidgeting and looked as if they wanted nothing more than to slink away into the shadows. *They were not involved,* Ami repeated in her mind and concentrated on breathing calmly and steadily to get her emotions under control. She didn't want to scare her new employees. Or rather, she didn't want to scare them more. She didn't like them looking at her with fear in their eyes, but could understand it, given the fact that she had made most of the others disappear without a trace.

They weren't the only ones ill at easy, though Ami tried to hide her discomfort at being in the presence of the undead creatures. Superficially, they looked human enough, even somewhat attractive. However, that just made their unnatural traits more disturbing. Their unnatural pallor, hungry expressions, long fangs, and lack of breathing made her skin crawl. Still, now that she had recruited them, she had best put them to work. "I have a task for you," she began.

Some of the vampires let their stances relax, while the more cautious ones only watched her with carefully neutral and respectful expressions. "It is a longer-term occupation. Since you can dominate ghosts and other undead, I want you to gather those that are still free and to herd them toward Rabixtrel. That's my horned reaper," she explained.

"Why? Wouldn't they make good minions?" one of the females, a short-haired blonde asked. The vampires standing to her left and right drifted away from her and still somehow managing to look as if

they weren't moving at all.

"No, they would not," Ami said firmly. "I have no use for mindless undead." Which was partially true. She had no use for them since the fact that they were the bound, suffering spirits of the deceased horrified her, and the faster she could free them from their tormented state, the better.

A taller vampire glanced over at the buxom vampiress who had dared question the Keeper, then back at Ami. "Your Imperial Majesty," he said, bowing very deeply, "are we to do this even during the day, in sunlight?"

Ami considered the question. It was a valid one, since the fiery sky spiral had disappeared wherever Zarekos' dungeon hearts were no longer pumping his particular flavour of corruption into the environment. The orange cloud cover still remained in some regions, since she hadn't located and smashed all of the vampire lord's former hearts yet. *Finding those should be a priority. I don't want any more Keepers popping up here!* The scientist in her looked forward to recovering some of these artefacts intact so that she could disassemble and analyse them properly. Her own storm clouds did not cover the entire continent yet, only the comparatively small regions that she had claimed. Interestingly enough, these regions had started to slowly expand on their own since she had become empress, without any action from her imps or rats. Rather convenient. In any case, her goal was controlling the corruption so that the land could return to a more or less normal state. "You may stick to the overcast regions during the day," Ami said, "or do research during that time. One of my former employees was working on the blueprints for a proper vampire graveyard. You could finish his project, perhaps by using his notes or by reverse-engineering Wemos' graveyard."

"Thank you, your Majesty," the vampire who had spoken said quickly.

"You are also strictly forbidden from harming any of my other employees. That includes drinking their blood. If you are hungry, use the room with the dead imps." Ami glared at the undead, making any protests die unsaid on their lips. "That is non-negotiable."

"We hear and obey," the vampires chorused, bowing.

Ami blinked. It was probably a mannerism that had been trained into them under their former masters. To end the audience on a friendlier note, she directed a weak smile at them. "Good. Dismissed."

Once the last of the group had teleported out with a flash of red, her rigid posture relaxed. She was glad that she had found some useful work for the creatures far away from her. If they were out in the field, then any Underworld denizens scrying on her dungeon would have a much harder time finding out how many of them she had left alive.

Ami pondered the huge eyeball undulating on top of a reddish, muscle-like stalk before her. The grotesque arcane device had not originally been intended for communication as such, even though her warlocks had come up with her communication spell by studying it. Originally, artefacts like this one were meant to incite treason by whispering seductive promises into the thoughts of enemies and inciting them to change sides. The blue-haired girl thought that with a bit more power and no concern for secrecy, it could double as a propaganda tool.

With some reluctance - it was a huge, slimy eyeball, after all - she reached toward the smooth orb. Even with her fingertips touching its cold wetness, she still hesitated. Public speaking didn't come easily to the shy girl, and so she had kept her script short and to the point. She cast out her attention into the direction of the Underworld army and focused on reaching all minds in the area with her mental broadcast. *Soldiers of the Underworld, hear me! I am Sailor Mercury, Empress of the Avatar Islands, and I have disposed of the Keeper who attacked your city, as well as his minions. Your goals are already accomplished, and you have no more reason to attack my lands. If greed is your motivation, however, it would be much easier and safer for you if you came to work for me.*

The Underworld army had halted, and an emergency meeting between the heads of the forces from the different cities was taking

place in a tent filled with unhappy voices.

"Damn Mercury and her subversive message!" a huge orc bellowed. "Now, it will become even harder to keep the soldiers in line! Over a fifth of my goblins have already deserted, the cowards!"

"Hah," a bile demon wearing ornate armour over his spherical bulk grunted, messily chewing on sheep's leg. "Doesn't speak highly of you if your troops are less afraid of you than of the enemy!"

"They must have been inspired by your great example. You were near the portal during her counter-attack, and all *you* did was play dead!" the dark elf sitting farthest away from the rotund monster pointed out in a sickeningly sweet voice.

The bile demon sputtered. "Wench, come here and say-"

Two blue-skinned fists impacted the head of the table with a loud bang. Wood splintered as its legs gave way, and the toppled goblets on its surface started sliding down the incline toward the dark angel who had just made his irritation known. The one-eyed crone, who had spent most of the conversation with her elbows resting on its surface and her face buried in her palms, looked up and shot an annoyed glare at him. Likewise, the violent interruption had drawn all gazes to the black-winged figure whose fists were still buried in the wood. "All of you, be silent! This is no time to be quarrelling over childish insults!" He gestured at the orc. "We'll just have to keep your men too tired to run away. How fast do you think we could be at the next undamaged portal if we remove breaks?"

"Well," the orc began, and suddenly stopped with a confused expression when no sound escaped from his moving lips.

The wrinkled woman in warlock robes lowered her right hand, crooked fingers still glowing faintly with dissipating mana. She shook her head slowly. "I tire of this nonsense."

"And what would you suggest, oh wise one?" The sarcasm in the dark angel's voice could have cut through armour. His expression suggested that she had better pick her next words very carefully.

"Sure," she cackled. "I say we declare victory and go home."

"Fool! How dare you suggest something like that! The loss of face would be unbearable! We have not struck a single blow against anyone! We would be ridiculed throughout the Underworld!" the dark angel roared.

"Oh yeah?" The crone cackled. "The Keeper who *defeated the Avatar himself* was so intimidated by us that she wiped out those who had offended us, desperate to placate us. That were enough vampires to take on an entire city, you know. She threw away that much power, rather than face us in battle. We are scary like that."

Around the ruined table, thoughtful and grinning expressions appeared as this interpretation of the facts was considered.

"You are all treacherous cowards!" the dark angel accused loud enough to make the tent vibrate. "She released the Avatar! The AVATAR. The greatest enemy of us all! She even *worked* with him! We must punish her insolenc-" Murderous rage flared up in his eyes when his lips mouth opened and closed, but no words formed. He looked about ready jump at the insolent old woman and wring her neck with his bare hands.

"Eh, he's going to go after Keepers, not us." The crone grinned, showing the many gaps between her teeth. "One would think you had some personal interest in this, eh? If at first you don't succeed, use a bigger army. How very Azzathra of you, Matthia."

The dark angel's glare hardened, and he wove a counterspell to the hex muting him. "What are you talking about now, you crazy old hag?"

She cackled once more. "This army isn't your personal force, as much as your master would like it to be." Her left hand sneaked to a magical amulet on her belt that would yank her to safety when broken. "Or are you currently controlling this body yourself, Keeper Morrigan?"

Cathy poked her head in through the door to Ami's laboratory. Like many of the rooms that the young Keeper was relocating from the iceberg to the mainland, it was still in a provisional state and consisted mostly of blank stone walls and a few shelves. "Mercury, can I have the crystal ball? That friend of yours should be back from school by now, and I'm going to transmit the rest of your message if you don't have something more pressing for me to do," the long-haired blonde announced.

Ami looked over her shoulder and smiled at the thought of being able to talk to her friends soon. "Of course, here it is." The cloud-filled sphere dropped out of thin air into the swordswoman's hand.

"Thanks!"

When Cathy left, the blue-haired girl returned her attention to her current project, poking the small cube in front of her with a metal engraving needle. An ice golem sat on the table in front of her, shifting its weight from time to time. One of the imps she had seized from the enemy Keepers stood next to the statue, blinking at her with huge black eyes. Behind her, she heard soft footsteps approach. "Jered," Ami greeted him, not looking up from her work. "Is there something you need?"

"Not in particular," the wavy-haired man said as he looked around the room. "I'd just thought finding out what you are working on would be more interesting than watching Cathy stare into a crystal ball for hours." He let his gaze wander up and down the curves of Ami's icy double appreciatively. "I like the new outfit."

The blue-haired girl blushed slightly, since the golem was wearing the reaper outfit she had somehow managed to modify while drunk. Even with the addition of a skimpy metal bikini, it was still too revealing for her tastes.*I always wore one-piece swimsuits, not bikinis,* she thought as she considered that the metal greaves, boots, small loincloth, and shoulder pauldrons did not hide much of the statue's - her - figure. "At least this won't be shattered and come off in combat like the ice chainmails," she said.

"Well, unless they take too much damage and shrink right out of it," Jered answered, amused. He was walking around the animated ice

figure, looking at it from all angles.

"Yes..." Ami hung her head. She got the feeling that he was staring a bit too hard at the golem. Was he trying to see through the transparent surfaces to the covered spots? Embarrassed and faintly irritated, Ami started explaining what she was doing. "The main benefit, as I see it, is the scythe. It's a metal weapon and makes them much more dangerous than they would be unarmed, or armed with an ice weapon."

"You included that spell in their skillset?"

Ami nodded. "I figured if goblins can use it, why not give it a try? The problem was that the golems don't have much capacity for magic. The first variants sucked the mana right out of themselves when trying to conjure the equipment, and turned into inert statues." She pointed with her thumb at a large puddle in the corner, where a few sad remains were melting away. "I found out that it works if I invest more magic than necessary into the spell that creates them."

"Sounds easy enough." Jered examined the weapon held by the sculpture's slender fingers. "I take it you are going to replace that with a sword, since you are more familiar with it?"

"I wish. The scythe is the main focal point of the spell, and if I tried to modify that, I might as well create an entirely new one from scratch." Ami wasn't about to admit that she didn't remember how exactly her inebriated self had managed to make the previous adjustments. "Oh, and I think if I use gold to create them, rather than my personal mana, I can get around their two main weaknesses. That temple water should no longer dissolve them, and I should be able to make more."

"Unlimited troops?" Jered asked, his expression lighting up.

"I doubt it," Ami said. "Like the imps, they are running on Metallia's power, and I can only channel a certain amount of that. Unfortunately, I can't waste gold on making enough golems to determine the limit right now."

Jered nodded. "No more using them as disposable fodder if they are

expensive," he said with a grin, wagging a finger as if he was chiding a child. "Well, I'll leave you to your experiments. I'll see if I can't find anyone who is willing to sell us some adamantine."

"Okay." Ami nodded as he left and looked at the imp before her. "Now, little guy, let's find out why some of the other Keeper's imps could teleport, and what that means for my golems."

"Oh my. You do look a bit sooty, granny," an amused female voice sounded from the crystal ball.

"Don't call me that," the one-eyed crone snapped, leaning on her slightly charred staff.

The woman shown by the scrying device giggled. "Morrigan's temper always had a tendency to flare."

"You'd think he would have learned patience by now. Anyway, your evidence was useful as always, Midori."

"Happy to hear it, granny. Just don't forget to pay up, yes?"

"As if you'd ever let me forget," the crone said, shaking her head.

Ami held a tear-shaped blue crystal about the size of her iris against the light and frowned. *Inclusions*, she thought as she spotted a few impurities marring the interior of the glittering sapphire. The treasury's magic would need to split it into much smaller and less valuable jewels than usual. With a soft sigh, she dismissed the still warm product of her gem furnaces, sending it to her coffers. As predicted, gold coins jingled when the bluish bulb split into a small mound of cut gems. A quick look at the dirty walls inside the furnaces with her Keeper sight confirmed her suspicion about the source of the pollutants. Her new gem furnaces did not need supervision, but apparently, they weren't maintenance-free, either. With a flash, she appeared on the throne in her command centre. The armchair-like seat creaked when her weight settled in it, alerting the sole warlock not on reaperbot-retrieval duty to her presence.

He peered over his shoulder, past the huge, starched collar of his robe. His eyes widened in surprise, and he bowed deeply. "Your Imperial Majesty! Your orders?"

"At ease. What is the Underworld army doing?"

The warlock glanced back at his scrying screen. "Disintegrating, your Majesty," he grinned. "Shortly following your proclamation, there was a bunch of explosions and flashes from one of the tents. Some fights broke out, and groups of soldiers started leaving after that."

"Really? That's great news!" Ami said with a wide smile. "Try to keep track of their leaders, if you can. I want to know who was involved in this."

"Of course, your Majesty."

Ami reclined in her chair and closed her eyelids halfway, leaving only two narrow, red-glowing slits open as she returned her attention to the state of her gem production. Right, maintenance. Fortunately, her Keeper powers meant that she didn't need to personally climb through the mess of cables, glowing tubes, beakers, and pendulums that camouflaged the real apparatuses. The corners of her lips curved upwards in faint amusement as she went to work. *Some empress I am, scrubbing soot off furnace walls.*

It was hard and time-consuming work, as she found out to her chagrin. *The next generation design needs access hatches for imps,* she decided. She would upgrade the current furnaces too, once they had completed their current production cycle and finished cooling down. The mechanical act of cleaning was not enough to occupy her thoughts, and she pulled out her Mercury computer. She needed to figure out into what she should remodel the corruption effects of her dungeon heart. Access to magma was required for power, and the surface shouldn't suffer for it. It would also be advantageous if she could integrate the more blatant manifestations somehow into her dungeon's defences, which definitely needed to be improved in light of recent threats. Unbidden, her specifications conjured up an image of a dark, steel-clad fortress perched precariously over a volcano in her mind. She smirked. That *would* be what was expected of a dark

lord, wouldn't it? It was right out, of course, since her dungeon was underground, but it was a starting point. She'd have to see if she couldn't find some iron ore, conjuring up steel was expensive. Her fingers raced over the keyboard as she went to work on the equations.

Frustrated with her lack of progress with the corruption problem, Ami took a break by conducting an experiment that was entirely unrelated. From a safe distance at the other end of the hallway, her sensors focused on one particular imp standing on top of a chalk cross drawn onto the ground. The imp eyed the closed hatch in the ceiling above her head and fidgeted, pouting. Other overall-clad imps stood not too far away, pointing and snickering.

The hatch opened, and the imp closed her eyes and ducked her head when something large and white dropped toward her. Ami watched with great interest as the tiny humanoid disappeared underneath the silver-runed cloth. Before she could risk using the Avatar's mantle to treat youma, she needed to know whether or not contact with the holy artefact would harm them. Jadeite had been unaffected by being taken into a temple of the Light, but he wasn't a youma and had been taken there under false assumptions. *Besides, he isn't particularly evil by local standards.* Her new imps, being animated by Metallia's dark energy, were probably the closest thing to real youma she could safely conduct tests on.

A bulge moved underneath the white cloth, sliding toward its edge. The imp was obviously still alive, but her squeals sounded vaguely irritated. She poked her head out from underneath the cover and looked back over her shoulder, blinking wide-eyed at the silver-runed garment An instant later, a greedy expression flitted over her bug-eyed face. With a swish, she gathered the mantle up and wrapped it tightly around her shoulders. Ami hid a chuckle behind one hand when the imp started to strut around with her nose pointing high into the air, trailing the overly large mantle behind her on the ground. She swung her pick around imperiously as if it was a royal sceptre, then stepped on the cloth, tripped, and smashed face-first into the floor tiles. The other imps snickered loudly, prompting the fallen one to growl, jump to her feet, and lunge for the closest

mocker's throat, tiny teeth bared.

There don't seem to be any adverse effects, at least, Ami mused as her experiment devolved into a brawl. *It's probably safe enough to help Tiger, then.* With a swirl of snowflakes, she disappeared to retrieve the mentally damaged youma.

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Communication Restored

Originally on 2011-01-15T03:11:00

Ami watched with bated breath as an imp slipped through the bars into Tiger's padded cell. The servant carried the Avatar's folded up mantle as she approached the striped youma. Ami prepared to transport the mentally-damaged creature away at the first sign that the artefact was causing her harm.

For her part, the youma remained lying on her bed, her eyes following the approaching imp with a bored expression. When the small minion had come within arms reach, Tiger pounced. With a quick grab, she snatched the little creature up and held her under her nose, sniffing as if trying to decide whether the imp was edible or not.

Frightened, the imp forgot about her orders, threw the mantle over the youma's horned head, and used the moment of blindness and confusion to escape.

Tiger ripped the silver-runed piece of cloth off her head and tossed it aside. Ami winced at the irreverent treatment of the holy artefact, but couldn't fault the horned youma for what she was doing. She didn't know better. Even as Ami watched, the being's furious scowl changed into an expression of shock as she looked down. "GYAAAAAAH!"

Ami flinched from the intensity of Tiger's screech, and her eyebrows crept up her forehead as the the youma started frantically patting herself down. That certainly hadn't be the reaction Ami had been expecting. "Is- is something wrong?"

The youma's head whipped into the blue-haired girl's direction."Is something wrong?" she repeated in a mocking, derisive way. "*Of course* something's wrong! I have shrunk! I'm pale! What happened to my beautiful muscles?" She glowered at the blue-haired girl, teal eyes narrowing. "I look almost as wimpy as you!"

Ami blinked, feeling vaguely insulted. "Well, there's a good explanat-"

"I can't bear it!" The youma cut her off. "Need to fix this!"

Ami's eyes almost popped out of their sockets when the youma's body blurred as if heat haze was covering it, and then appeared changed under a glamour.

"Why are you staring at me like that?" Tiger challenged.

Even the sound of the youma's voice had changed and put Ami on edge. "Why," she asked with a strained smile, "are you looking like me?"

Behind the bars, the glamoured copy of Mizuno Ami, perfect right down to the school uniform, tilted her head and conjured a mineral shard polished to reflectiveness. "Bwah? Are you dumb or just blind? I look nothing like you!"

"But-" *Oh, right, senshi recognition block.* Ami decided that convincing the youma could wait. There were more important things she had to find out first. "Why did you pick that form in the first place?"

"Dunno. It just felt right, I suppose."

"Even though it is even *wimpier*," Ami carefully imitated the youma's previous pronunciation of the word, "than before?"

"That is strange, now that you mention it." The being wearing Ami's civilian face scowled. "Wait, I always looked like this. No, that's wrong, I never did that. Argh! Why do I have these weird memory fragments shoved into my head?"

"Sorry, I fear that's my fault," Ami said, shuffling her feet.

"Yours?" the youma hissed. Her face scrunched up, and she chewed on her lower lip as she sorted her thoughts. "Hmm, yes, I think I remember. This has potential." In an instant, she struck a familiar pose that Ami found very disconcerting to see from the outside. "Mercury Power, Make Up!"

Absolutely nothing happened, and Ami let out a breath of relief. "I'm fairly certain that only works for me."

"A pity." The Ami in the cell got a mischievous expression on her face. "Oh well, I'll console myself with all that awesome mind control magic in the library." A pause. "Wait, did I say that out loud?"

Ami nodded slowly.

"Crap, now you are going to keep me away from that, won't you? You have some pretty messed up views in your head," the youma commented. "It's crazy to just dump all of those wonderful tomes into a restricted section. Just think how useful that kind of magic that would be. You want to jump general Jadeite's bones, don't you? Yuck, that's an idea I could have done without."

Ami blushed furiously, and her eyes narrowed. "Don't be so crass!"

"Aaanyway, aside from the fact that you have no taste in men, just think! One little spell, and you could put your hands all over him."

"I want love, not instant gratification," Ami snapped, her cheeks colouring deeper.

"Tough. The meek way you are trying to catch his attention isn't going to work." Tiger cackled, a sound that Ami found deeply disturbing when it was her own voice that produced it. "The guy has no clue what you want from him, and even if he did, he'd be too worried to offend you! Seriously, you'd be doing him a favour if you took advantage of your position and ordered him into your bed."

"That would be improper and demean-"

"Once you had him there, it should be easy enough to convince him that he's in love with you." The conviction in the glamour double's voice waned a bit as she gave the fuming young Keeper the once-over. "Well, maybe not with *that* body. Or Inexperience. You know what? If you need some helpful hints, there's this interesting thing you could do with your tongue that-"

Ami covered her ears with her hands. "I'm not listening to any more of this!" She disappeared, greatly annoyed at the youma. *How dare*

she... I'm not that unattractive, am I? Ami decided that letting the creature stew in the cell for a while could only teach her to better consider her words in the future.

"Hey! HEY!" Tiger rattled the bars of her cell. "Come back! Let me out!" When it became obvious that the teenager was out of hearing distance, she concentrated for a moment, then slumped in disappointment. "No Keeper powers for me, either. Darn it!" A pause. That didn't sound right. "I mean, Darkness take it! Darn it, she really made a mess out of my mind!"

Hidden by the foliage behind the Hikawa shrine, Rei squatted in front of a glazed tile. She moved cautiously so that her red and white shrine maiden robes wouldn't get stained by the grass. Above her, Luna was lying on a tree branch. The raven-haired girl hoped that the black cat was taking her job as a lookout seriously. She didn't want to have to come up with an awkward explanation for what she was doing here in case her grandfather caught her. Spotting movement in front of herself, she shot a warning glare at the blonde crouching across the tile from her and made a shooing motion. "Usagi, your pigtails! Don't get any closer!" the raven-haired girl whispered.

The blonde froze, her eyes going wide in understanding as she looked at the intricate pattern drawn in powdery, easily-smudged flour onto the tile. With a nod of understanding, Usagi backed away slowly.

"I think there's a spot missing," Makoto said to Rei's left. The pony-tailed brunette was peering over a set square at the network of lines, holding a pair of compasses in her other hand.

Rei consulted the schematics on the paper before her and nodded. She took another pinch of floor from the bag at her feet and carefully let it trickle onto the stone, adding a new line.

"Great! I think we are done!"

Rei couldn't find fault with the taller girl's assessment. "Luna, is anyone nearby?"

The cat raised her head, ears twitching as she scanned the surroundings. "Nobody. Are you going to start now?"

"Yes! We'll be able to talk with Ami again soon now!" Usagi cheered.

Rei felt herself smile, infected by the blonde's enthusiasm.

"Please be careful. Stop immediately if something feels wrong, yes? I'm worried about you using foreign magic," Luna cautioned.

Makoto inclined her head, agreeing with the feline's words.

"Ami wouldn't send us something dangerous," Usagi defended her missing friend.

"I know that." Luna's tail twitched in irritation, "but that doesn't mean she can't be deceived. She is surrounded by evil everywhere." A few leaves rustled when the black cat jumped off her perch and landed in front of Rei, sat down, and looked her straight in the eyes. "Promise me that you'll be careful!"

The shrine maiden felt slight irritation at being mothered like that, but fought it down. The moon cat meant well. "I will. Makoto, the incense sticks, please." Her nose caught a whiff of aromatic smoke as she unrolled a mat and knelt down on it. With her eyes half-closed, Rei mumbled the seemingly nonsensical syllables of the spell she had memorised. She felt strange, but similar to when she was meditating in front of the sacred flame.

Two sentences into the ritual, she brought one of the incense sticks close to the diagram. The flour caught fire unnaturally fast, burning with constant brightness as she continued with the second half of the spell. She heard her friends gasp when the flames produced more smoke than they should be able to, but didn't let that break her concentration. When she got to the end of the fourth sentence, the smoke had formed a bell-shaped tent over the tile and was so dense she could no longer see the flames. She intoned the final syllables and slumped down, feeling drained.

"It worked!" Usagi cheered, leaning in closer as the grey cloud dispersed and something glittered within.

"Of course it did!" Rei was too satisfied with her accomplishment - on the first try, too - to reprimand her friend for being a bit louder than secrecy demanded. Together with the other girls, she leaned forward to look at the crystal sphere that had appeared in the centre of the sooty diagram. It was about twice as big as her fist and rested on a low base decorated with golden flames. Rei felt a soft nudge against her knee and tore her gaze away from the device she had summoned.

Luna removed her paw from the shrine maiden's red-clad leg and looked up at her. "Are you all right, Rei? Is that thing safe?"

"I'm just a bit tired." Rei glanced back at the crystal ball and reached for it. "I don't sense any evil."

Suddenly, she felt Usagi's hand on the arm grasping at the crystal ball. "Ami said we should transform before using it if we want to reach her," the blond reminded her friend.

"I know that. I wasn't going to-"

Makoto parted the bushes and looked out into the court. "Guys, Rei's grandfather is coming straight for us! He's walking pretty quickly," the tall brunette whispered urgently.

"Argh!" Rei did not want to lie to him about her extracurricular activities. She gathered up the mat and the crystal ball as she jumped to her feet. "Grab everything and run!"

"Wah! It's still hot!" Usagi let go of the warm tile, which dropped back into the grass with a soft thud.

"Just turn it over and leave it," Rei snapped, looking back over her shoulder. Makoto was already on the job, delivering a deft kick to the square stone. It flipped over, covering the pattern burnt into its surface. "Now run! Hurry!"

Grandpa Hino didn't take long to find the recently-vacated, hidden spot behind his shrine. His eyes narrowed as he inspected the flattened grass. He knew he had felt something very strange from this direction a few minutes ago, and this place had to be the origin. The short, bald man scratched his head and sniffed the air. He had been a priest long enough to recognise the faint scent of incense sticks mixed with the burnt smell lingering in the air.

He could distinguish three distinct sets of shallow footprints, left by small, delicate feet. His grey eyebrows rose when he spotted a familiar-looking imprint of a shoe sole in the faintly humid soil. He had seen a similar pattern only a short while ago when Rei walked through the court after stepping into a puddle. *What have the girls been up to?* he wondered, squatting down to have a closer look at the fine ash next to a stone tile lying on the ground.

He hoped this wasn't what he suspected it was. He had taught his granddaughter better than that! Teenagers could be troublesome and rebellious though, a little voice nagged in the back of his head. His finger brushed against the tile. Warm. Had they covered something up? Tipping the stone plate over, he immediately spotted the strange network of black lines burned into its surface. Relief flooded him.*They aren't experimenting with drugs, after all! But this design is most ominous.* What was his darling granddaughter doing? This didn't look like a Shinto ritual to him. And why the secrecy?

He was glad that his granddaughter seemed happier since she had made friends with those pretty other girls, but he wondered if they weren't a bad influence on her. He hadn't missed the fact that, since meeting Usagi, she had come home more than once sporting bruises, even if she had tried to hide them. He had wondered once if the blonde hadn't dragged his granddaughter into some kind of girl gang, but had dismissed the notion as absurd. Usagi seemed too nice and cheerful to fit into a group like that. Makoto matched the bad girl stereotype more, being tall, strong, and wearing long skirts, but it would be wrong to judge her by her appearance. Still, the strange little things were adding up. Rei smelling of smoke the day the news reported about a freak fire that had burned down an abandoned mansion. The bruises. Now something that triggered his mystical senses.

The elderly man straighten suddenly and shivered. That poor Mizuno girl who had disappeared without a trace had also been friends with Usagi. Perhaps he should tell Rei to keep away from her? Oh yes, that would go over well. He shuddered when he imagined the black-haired girl's reaction. His granddaughter had quite the temper, and a sharp tongue to match. Just like her mother. The bald priest lowered his head. He wouldn't confront Rei just yet, but he would keep a closer eye on the group. A grin appeared on his wrinkly face. He had no problem with that, since they were all easy on the eyes.

Ami flipped a page of the heavy tome lying on her desk when the bracelet around her left wrist lit up, alerting her to a foreign scrying attempt. In what had almost become a routine reaction, she folded her arms and thrust her hands forward. "Shabon Spray!"

Scintillating bubbles shot from her fingers and concealed the room with a dense mist. The blue-haired girl got up from her chair and moved to the side, calling a crystal ball to her hand. She concentrated on tracing the spy, and the orb resting in her black-gloved palm lit up. *It's taking more power than tracking down the locals. Could it be...?*

Ami's rapid heartbeat thundered in her ears as her anticipation rose. An endless second later, she saw three faces and one cat in the scrying device's cloudy interior. A smile like a sunrise appeared on the young Keeper's face, and she released a breath she hadn't noticed she had been holding. "Everyone," she shouted into the crystal ball, barely able to contain her excitement. "Can you hear me?"

"Sailor Mercury!" Sailor Mars replied.

Hearing a familiar voice from her own world almost brought tears of happiness to Ami's face.

"Yes! We can hear you! This thing works!" Sailor Moon exclaimed as she brought her face closer to the curved glass, dragging its focus from Mars to herself. "Um, you can hear our answers, right?"

"Yes," Ami nodded, "I'm so glad we can finally talk again!"

"Hi there. How are you doing?" The third girl spoke up, sounding more reserved than her jubilant companions.

Ami started upon hearing the unknown voice. She had never met Sailor Jupiter in person, and it was the first time she heard the tall brunette talk.

"Hello. Sailor Jupiter? It's nice to meet you," Ami said, bowing politely. "I'm doing fine, thank you."

A large, black cat face with a crescent moon on its forehead filled Ami's crystal ball. "Are you really all right? You look exhausted," Luna said, sounding worried.

Ami shrugged, and her smile faltered a little. "I have been under a lot of stress lately. With everything that has been going on, I couldn't maintain a regular sleep schedule. I don't get to see daylight underground, either." When her friends' faces fell, she quickly added "Don't worry, the immediate danger has passed, and I should be able to get more rest soon." She really hoped that no other urgent problems would surface now that she felt more or less on top of things.

"Take care," Luna cautioned. "Can you hold still for a moment, please? I want to have a better look at that new uniform of yours."

Ami complied with the moon cat's request, feeling slightly self-conscious as she imagined the crystal ball's viewpoint circling her body.

"I don't recognise any of those symbols on your collar," Luna muttered, "do they have any particular significance?"

"They are used in the local Underworld," the blue-haired girl explained, "they show one's rankings in the local schools of magic. However, most of them only denote a beginner's proficiency. Only skimming a magical text is often enough to pick one up, and I read a lot."

Sailor Mars and Sailor Moon nodded in unison as they heard that.

"And her books don't even have pictures in it!"

"Well, I can't see anything particular alarming from here, aside from the colour change and the bat-like bows and ribbons. Are you sure there's nothing more nefarious happening, Sailor Mercury?" Luna was done circling the crystal ball on the table and jumped onto Sailor Moon's left shoulder.

"I'm fairly certain the changes are only cosmetic," Ami said, "none of my senshi powers have been adversely affected, and my computer can't detect any harmful effects."

"Well, your outfit makes you look kind of scary, especially with your red eyes," Sailor Moon said, giggling to take the sting out of her words.

"Yes. Doesn't the glow hurt?" Sailor Jupiter asked curiously.

"I don't really notice it when I'm not in front of a mirror," Ami said. "I hope it goes away when I get home." Internally, Ami winced. She looked scary? Was that why Jadeite didn't show much interest in her?

"We'll find a way to turn you back to normal, I promise!" Sailor moon declared, causing Ami to smile and forget her momentary anxiety.

The young Keeper took a look at her friends' surroundings. The three sailor senshi were sitting around a low table in a small living room, lit by lamplight because the shutters in front of the window were closed. "Um, this isn't Sailor Mars' room?" she asked when she failed to recognise the place.

"We are in my apartment," Sailor Jupiter explained. "I live alone, so nobody is going to barge in on us here."

"Ah." Ami noted that the pony-tailed brunette had to be very good at housekeeping.

"Wait a minute, you can see the room?" Sailor Mars asked in amazement. "All we see is you and some grey clouds!"

"Oh, I forgot!" Ami's cheeks turned a light pink, and she dispelled her

magical fog with a wave of her free hand. "There, you should be able to see me properly now!"

"Ohhh," Usagi's eyes widened in appreciation as she suddenly had a much better view of the bookshelves along the room's walls. "Hey, why don't you give us a tour of your place?"

"A tour?" Ami pondered the idea for a moment. "Sure, why not? Well, this is my study," she said, gesturing toward the desk next to a formulae-covered whiteboard on the wall. "It's where I do most of my reading and planning."

"A chandelier?" Luna wondered as she spotted the garish, eight-pronged light source hanging from the vaulted ceiling.

"Well, the dungeon's intrinsic corruption seem to interfere less with objects that adhere to certain themes and aesthetics," Ami explained.

"Huh?"

"I need to change the light bulbs less often if I make the lamps look creepy, Sailor Moon," Ami clarified. "Also, since I spend so much time here, people come here to find me. The room effectively doubles as my office, so it may as well look nice."

"I see," Luna said.

"Do you do all your research here?" Sailor Jupiter asked.

"No, I also have a laboratory. I'd never get the scorch marks out of the carpet if I performed my experiments here," Ami said, hiding a giggle behind her right hand.

"Magical experiments? That sounds exciting. Could you show us your lab?" Sailor Mars requested.

Ami nodded. "Sure, we can start the tour there. Just focus on me to find it," she instructed. With a flash of blue light, she disappeared in a funnel of whirling snowflakes. She reappeared on top of a balcony overlooking a deep drop down into wafting banks of dry-ice-generated mist. Like the shadow of a prehistoric beast, an

unfinished prototype gem furnace loomed from the depths, and only a few spotlights illuminated the otherwise dark chamber.

"Greetings, Mercury," a red-and-white robed silhouette called from one of the platforms jutting into the cavernous void.

"Oh, hello Snyder," Ami greeted the redhead.

"I regret to inform you that my work on the warding scheme of Zarekos' temple has not produced any tangible results yet." An engraved brick was floating on the workbench behind the young man, lit from below by a blue-glowing pattern of inscriptions. "On a more positive note, your imps have located the blood sample taken from you. They already disposed of it in a pool of lava."

"That's great!" Ami acknowledged. "Don't let me distract you from your work, then. I'm only here to show my friends the dungeon!"

"...oh, there she is," Sailor Jupiter's voice came from the crystal ball that Ami held in her left hand.

The Acolyte looked rather interested. "Friends from your own world?"

"Huh, who's tha-"

"Wow, being able to teleport must be so great," Sailor Moon exclaimed, interrupting Mars. "I wish I could do that! I'd never be late for school again!" the blonde said wistfully.

"You'd just sleep in even longer and still be late," Mars teased good-naturedly.

"Would not!"

"Would too!"

"Mercury, do you think you could teach the girls how to teleport?" Luna asked, sounding intrigued by the possibilities. The three senshi perked up at the thought.

"NO!" Ami's outburst was loud enough to make the cat flatten her

ears against her skull and cause the other girls to look up in alarm. "I refuse to teach that spell as long as I'm not there personally to supervise," she said sternly, putting her arms akimbo. "Don't even try to experiment with that kind of magic. If you do it wrong, or before your system had the opportunity to adapt to the necessary energies, you *will* die!"

"Oh." Usagi paled, and Ami was glad she didn't have to go into the disturbing, graphical detail.

Meanwhile, Snyder had made his way across one of the catwalks, gripping the metal railing tightly all the way, and gotten close enough to throw a look into Ami's crystal ball.

"Oh, everyone, this is Snyder. He's an acolyte from the surface, and not one of the bad guys," Ami introduced him. "Snyder, my friends Sailor Moon, Sailor Mars, Sailor Jupiter, and Luna."

Each girl in the crystal ball waved when her name was mentioned, and even Luna raised a paw. All four of them leaned in closer to get a better look, and Ami was starting to worry that their heads would collide if they kept it up. They returned the greeting, not really sure what to make of the short man.

"He's one of the few guys I can trust to not use my research for evil ends, so he can assist me with projects that I'd rather keep out of others' hands."

"So what are you doing for our Sailor Mercury?" Sailor Mars asked, sounding curious. The red and white outfit of the portly acolyte, identical in colour to shrine maiden robes, had drawn her attention.

"Typically, I have healing duties, but right now, I am exerting my warding expertise investigating a possible way to shield against enemy scrying. A project whose value you can certainly appreciate."

"Yeah, everyone needs some privacy," Usagi agreed, grimacing. She could clearly empathise with Ami's situation.

"I have to hide or camouflage everything I want to keep secret," Ami elaborated on the redhead's words. "That's why I keep important

places dark or fogged up."

"Oh, I had been wondering about why your lab was so dark," Sailor Jupiter said, comprehension flashing across her face.

Sailor Moon eeped when a transformer behind Ami discharged arcs of flickering lightning. "Good reasons or not, your lab is creepy, Mercury."

Luna let out an exasperated sigh. "I guess that means she won't have to change light bulbs any time soon. So, what kind of experiments are you performing, Sailor Mercury?"

"Designing equipment, working with the power grid, and testing out ideas." She thought for a moment before her face lit up with enthusiasm. "Wait, I'll just show you one!" A quick teleport brought her to the ground floor of the cavernous chamber, where a few ice golems were sparring in a pool of water. In the crystal ball, the three girls gaped at the animated statues whose scythes clashed against each other.

"Are they the golems you told us about? They look just like you!" Usagi commented.

"I wish they didn't. Really, I do," Ami said in a much put-upon tone of voice.

"They sure do show a lot of skin," Sailor Jupiter mused, scratching her head at the sight of the sparse chains and plates of metal that constituted the statues' reaper's outfit.

The blue-haired girl blushed faintly. "Technical reasons. It's much better than nothing, though. In any case, they don't really need armour." Her enthusiasm returned she walked past the training ice creatures. "I'll show you one of the ideas I'm working on right now. Over here!" With a spring in her step, Ami approached a pit and brought a large lever down with an energetic yank, using both hands.

Sparks flew from thick, vine-like cables that snaked down into the hole, connecting to a slender, female figure lying on a metal table.

Gradually, the body started radiating heat and red light, illuminating the scorched walls and the small globs of metal littering the floor. The simulacrum's eyes opened. Glowing in tones ranging from red along the more rigid parts of its limbs, to yellow around its joints, it slowly sat up with a deliberate, stiff motion.

Ami jumped and thrust her fist into the air. "Yes! It's finally working!"

"It's ALIVE!" Sailor Moon intoned in a very hammed up tone of voice, then broke into a fit of giggles when Mercury tilted her head and looked at her oddly. "What? Someone had to say it! All you are missing is some cheesy music!"

The girls all froze when they heard off-tune pipe music. Ami blinked and slowly turned toward the sound. Dumbfounded, she stared at the imp sitting on top of a workbench, playing a simple melody on her crudely-carved bone flute. Huge, black eyes met Ami's gaze, and the imp let out a cheeky squeal.

Ami gave her a stern look. "Don't you start, too!"

Sailor Jupiter 's green eyes were sparkling with mirth. "You even have your own diminutive hunchback! Do you call her Igor?"

Ami pouted. "Now even my imps are making fun of me. But I'll show them! I'll show you all!" She held a determined pose with her fist in the air, then dissolved into laughter, joining the others. Oh, how good it felt to be able to talk with them and joke around!

"Um, Sailor Mercury?" Luna spoke up loudly to make herself heard over the amused sounds. "Your creature isn't looking well."

"Hmm?" Ami quickly turned back to her newest golem, which wasn't looking so hot, figuratively speaking. The statue was spurting molten metal from her knuckles, and her neck bent like heated wax. "Oh. It's- well, the temperature control spells still need a little adjustment," Ami said, scratching her head."I'm trying to make a golem that works on the same principles as the ice ones, replacing water with molten metal and the ice shell with a metal one. The whole system is much more energetic, which makes it much harder to control and keep together. Even just preventing it from losing to much of its start-up

heat into the environment is-"

The glowing golem's left leg fell off at the hip, causing the figure to topple and bleed a large glob of bright, almost white-hot molten metal from the wound.

Ami put a hand in front of her mouth and blinked. "Correction. It still needs a lot of adjustment." Her shoulders drooped.

"At least it looked spectacular," Sailor Mars tried to comfort her friend.

"Yes, that was really neat," Sailor Moon chimed in.

"I'm happy you liked it," Ami said. "Don't worry, I'm not too disappointed. While the idea is simple, ironing out the problems will be more of a long term project." She smiled. "So what do you want to see next?"

Guided Tour

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"So, you have electricity over there? Where do you get it from?" Sailor Jupiter asked, watching sparks coming off a cable behind Sailor Mercury.

"I built a few generators with the help of the library books you provided for me," Ami explained. "I'll show you what drives them, follow me!"

She disappeared in a whirl of blue, only to wink back into existence in a large grotto. The cloud of snowflakes accompanying her arrival melted the moment she appeared, and the flash of her arrival mixed with the reddish lighting, painting the raw rock walls violet for an instant. Sets of metal pipes, huge enough to crawl through, wormed their way along the raw stone walls before angling down into the ground or disappearing into the ceiling.

"I used to use windmills to power the generators," Ami shouted to make herself heard over the noise of water rumbling and steam hissing within the tubes, "But since a perpetual storm would be bad for the environment, I'm transitioning to steam." She gestured with her right hand toward the valve-studded pipes that rumbled behind her, and walked toward the exit from the cave, keeping the crystal floating at eye height before her. With increasing distance, the noise coming from the pipes sank to a more bearable level. She wiped away small droplets of sweat from her forehead. "This is the lowest point of my dungeon, even deeper than the dungeon heart. Seawater runs down into the underground through the pipes back there, encounters the molten rock in the depths below, and thunders up through the other pipes as steam that I use to power generators," Ami told them, proud in her accomplishments.

"Molten rock, as in magma?" Sailor Jupiter asked. At Ami's nod, she continued "Isn't that dangerous?"

"The magma around here has many routes to the surface and isn't

under much pressure. I also have some limited control over the underground through my dungeon heart," the blue-haired girl said, "but I'm not relying on it. There is only a single, narrow tunnel connecting this place to the rest of the dungeon, and it's rigged to collapse if the inbuilt steel hatches fail. I'm minimising risks here."

"Sailor Moon, stop playing around with the focus! Move it back to Mercury!" the annoyed voice of Sailor Mars came from the crystal ball.

"But this looks interesting! Hey, Sailor Mercury, what are those huge-eyed little things doing?"

Ami walked over to the next room, where a group of eight tiny, bug-eyed creatures with helmets and blue overalls were walking clockwise around a round metal pillar protruding from the ground. They were pushing at bars that fanned out like spokes of a wheel from the central column, which emitted soft grinding and scraping noises as it rotated.

"Those imps are drilling a hole for a new pipe," Ami explained. "Due to the heat, pressure, and instabilities in the rock, it's too dangerous for them to dig down there. It's a bit more complicated than just using picks, but since I can recycle the steel used for the drill, I don't lose much gold in the process."

"Oh yes, gold. You are kind of rich now." Sailor moon exclaimed. "Can you show us-"

"Stop!" Ami interrupted, holding up both arms with an alarmed expression on her face. "Don't mention where my wealth comes from! Others may be listening in on our conversation. I think it's safe to assume that at least the Light gods can monitor what you do with your crystal ball, so use it responsibly, please."

"What? Does that mean they already know our civilian identities?" Sailor Mars said heatedly, gripping the table's edge hard with both hands. The notion didn't seem to sit well with Luna either, judging from the way her fur bristled.

Ami raised both hands in a placating gesture, leaning away from her

crystal ball as Sailor Mars' face filled it, purple eyes narrowed.

"Please don't worry! They are, without a doubt, good guys! They oppose me, but that's only because they don't want me to return home and allow the dark gods access to our world." Ami's faded smile returned as she continued "but I'm sure they'll help me get home once I have my soul back!"

Sailor Moon nodded briefly and slammed her fist into her open hand. "Right! That means the faster we beat that Metallia thing, the faster we get you back! Can't be too hard to defeat a comatose monster, right?"

Usagi's optimism was heart-warming, but Ami didn't believe it would be quite that simple. "I'm afraid the Dark Kingdom forces guarding their 'Great Ruler' would have something to say about that. Stopping the Dark Kingdom from gathering enough energy to wake Metallia is the best way for you to help me right now," she said without hesitation. "Aside from that, I also appreciate being able to access science books." Her face turned less serious. "Actually, the next book I need isn't going to be in the science section. You know that I need to act like an evil overlord in front of the others here from time to time, yes? So I thought some literature on that might be helpful."

"The library has books on evil overlording now?" Sailor Jupiter asked, sounding rather sceptical.

"They probably put them right next to instruction manuals for teachers," Usagi quipped.

Ami shot the blonde a reproachful look. "I'm talking about books on *acting*, of course. I'm really not very good at it," Ami said, eyes downcast, "so I thought if I studied it more...."

"Ah, yes, that makes more sense," Sailor Mars said.

Luna shook her head. "Sailor Mercury, I think acting is one of those fields where practice makes perfect. You would probably waste your time trying to pick it up from books."

"At the very least, it could tell me what not to do," Ami said, not too

discouraged. "So, is there something else I can do to help you with in return?"

The other girls looked at each other. "Well, the crystal ball alone will help us keep better track of Dark Kingdom activities, so the burden won't be on Mars alone," the black moon cat sitting on Sailor Moon's shoulder pondered.

"Be careful about that!" Ami cautioned. "Make sure you transform before you spy on the Dark Kingdom. There are ways to see who is scrying on you."

"Thanks for the warning," Sailor Moon said. "Do you know any useful spells you could teach us that aren't too dangerous?"

"How about flying?" Sailor Mars suggested, looking eager. "It's so frustrating that all our enemies can fly and we can't!"

"Hmm." Ami frowned, thinking. "Yes, that could work. I'll assign one of my youma as a teacher for you."

"You want them to learn from a youma?" Luna's tail stood straight in the air. The girls didn't look too thrilled, either.

"Well, I learned it from Jadeite in the first place, and I don't have the time to teach you personally," the blue-haired girl said apologetically. "It's not an easy spell. Since you'll need continued tutoring, and all the youma can fly and should be powerful enough to reach you with scrying, they are a logical choice."

"If you say so." Sailor Mars' enthusiasm seemed somewhat dampened by Mercury's suggestion.

"Promise me to only practice the spell indoors as long as you haven't mastered it!" Ami ordered, her voice stern. "It's hard to control, and I bumped into the ceiling and walls a lot while learning it. You wouldn't want to zoom off into the sky with no way to get down safely."

Sailor Moon let out a small whimper, eyes round. "I promise!"

Mars and Jupiter nodded too.

Ami seemed satisfied by their serious expressions. "Good. Actually, having the youma scry is a very good idea that I really should have come up with earlier. I'll have them help you keep an eye on the Dark Kingdom's activities, too. If something comes up, I'll contact Rei."

"Thanks, Sailor Mercury," Luna said. "That will help us out a lot."

Dead twigs, weakened by rot and mould, fell apart as leather-gloved hands gently pushed apart the dense undergrowth in front of their owner. The elven scout froze, suppressing a curse at the snapping sounds. Not one muscle twitched as he listened with baited breath for any reaction from the swamps around him. A few large bubbles rose from the murky, greyish waters and disgorged a putrid smells into the swarms of gnats buzzing above. Aside from those unpleasant sounds, the wilderness was silent.

Carvon remained still for several minutes, until the foot carrying almost all of his body's weight started to itch from lack of blood flow to the limb. Reasonably sure that nothing would suddenly pop out of the swamp and devour him, the scout proceeded onwards. Concealed by enchantments that made his skin and leather clothing match the colour of his environment, the elf was a silent, chameleon-like blur moving through the dead and dying vegetation.

Scrying was all well and good for finding an enemy, but it didn't make navigating terrain any easier. Without people like him, an army could wander around in an inhospitable marshland like this one for months without ever finding its destination. His hand went to his pocket, touching the reassuring shape of Baron Leopold's transformed hero gate underneath the thin leather. Once he had planted the valuable, currently nut-shaped artefact in the proper location, it would revert to its original shape. Wouldn't Arachne be surprised when the baron and his men suddenly showed up on the doorstep of her largest and most remote dungeon?

The sickly sweet stench of carrion grew stronger, and Carvon flinched when what he had mistaken for a black rock dissolved into a cloud of thick flies with gleaming carapaces. The sweltering,

stagnant air filled with tiny black bodies, and for a nightmarish moment, he feared that the Keeper herself had found him. When the insects settled back on the ground without bothering him more than was natural for their kind, he spotted the corpse that the crawling, black carpet had hidden. The elf's delicate eyebrows rose at the sight of the giant spider in an advanced state of decomposition, its chitinous carapace broken open along the back. It belonged to one of the largest species in Arachne's employ, vicious and armed with a deadly poison to boot. Not something that should fall prey to the natural dangers of a swamp.

Carvon's gaze remained on the corpse's jagged injury, and he shivered despite the heat. Was there something worse than giant spiders hiding in these swamps? Unknown dangers were always worse than expected ones. Distracted as he was by going through the mental catalogue of dangerous creatures he knew, he could be excused for not immediately noticing the ever-present buzzing becoming louder. However, when a moving shadow appeared in the sky, his eyes immediately sought it out. A giant fly was overhead, flying so low that its beating wings almost touched the leafless branches of the rotting trees grasping at the clouds. His keen elven sight could make out the facets of its bulbous eyes and the individual bristles covering its segmented legs. They did not miss the bleached skeleton riding the beast, holding a ruby-encrusted wizard's staff in its bony fingers.

The buzzing did not abate when the fly and its rider disappeared toward the west. Instead, the vibrations in the air became even stronger, and to Carvon's surprise, an entire flight of nearly thirty of the beasts darkened the sky, each one carrying a skeletal passenger. The scout was glad they had not spotted him, but something struck him as very strange here. Spiders and flies did not get along, and using both of them at the same time was just asking for trouble. Arachne wasn't know for using the undead much, either. No, if he combined all those facts with the dead spider before him, he could only reach one conclusion. There was another Keeper active in the area. The Baron needed to be informed of the changed situation immediately!

On Sailor Moon's insistence, the next stop of the tour was Ami's treasury. "Wow, you are rich, Sailor Mercury!" the blonde exclaimed when the black-dressed girl appeared in the well-lit chamber.

Mars and Jupiter, and even Luna, stared goggle-eyed at the sparkling coins and sapphires. Appreciative squeals soon followed.

"Hey, Mercury's face is on all of them!" Jupiter pointed out. "It's almost like she's a real queen," she giggled.

"Well, actually-" Ami began, putting one hand to her mouth shyly.

"Ohhh, look at those gems! Are they all sapphires?" Sailor Moon asked, interrupting her friend. She inspected them more closely. "Hmm, they all have the same, kind of boring cut," she declared with familiarity gained from hanging out with Naru, whose mother was a jeweller.

"The coins and gems are prepared automatically from raw materials I put into this room," Ami explained, "these seem to be the default settings. I don't have a skilled gem cutter working for me."

"You should get one. They'd fetch a much better price with a better cut," the blonde said.

Ami opened her mouth to say that the shape of objects didn't affect what the dungeon heart could achieve with them, but stopped. She didn't actually know that, did she? Logically, if the chamber turned two gems of same weight and quality into gold, their shape shouldn't matter to the outcome. *Then again, magic doesn't always behave logically*, she thought with a sideways glance at the frost patterns decorating the room. Testing that theory couldn't hurt. "Thanks, that might be worth looking into," she said with a smile.

Truthfully, the girls' enthusiastic reaction to the riches left her feeling a bit like an outsider, since she didn't share it. She wondered when she had become so accustomed to gold that the sight of a pile that reached up to her knee left her only with a nagging feeling of worry that it wouldn't be enough for all she had planned.

"This is the best part of switching to geothermal power," Ami said with a smile when warm, humid air wafted into her face. "Heated baths!"

With all the fog and steam in the air, the rounded pool framed by several rocks to sit on looked like some sort of evil, water-filled crater just waiting for unsuspecting victims to stumble into it. In Ami's opinion, that was a mild enough concession for keeping the corruption from making its own unpredictable, and potentially uncomfortable alterations.

"Oh, your own hot springs!" Mars said, undaunted by the deliberately raw and unfinished look of the place. "I'm envious!"

"This are public baths, actually," Ami corrected. "Anyone living here can use them, though they are usually busier."

"Yuck!" A high-pitched female screech echoed through the hall, coming from one of the denser banks of steam. Splashing and thrashing noises followed. "Get away from me, you freak!"

"Mercury, what's going on?" Luna wanted to know.

Sailor Moon was already fiddling with the crystal ball, trying to find out on her own. Her eyes went wide. "Mercury, there's a naughty tentacle monster in your pool, accosting some pointy-eared person!" she shouted out, biting her nails as she peered into the orb, unable to do something to help.

"Eek! Gross!" Sailor Jupiter looked sick as silhouettes of thin tendrils in the fog wriggled toward an agitated female shape.

"I'm aware of the problem," Ami sighed, burying her face in her palm as her Keeper sight showed her exactly what was going on. Namely, Venna stabbing furiously at the green and black tentacles rising out of the water around her. *Where'd she get that dagger from, anyway?* Ami wondered, considering the voluptuous dark elf's current state of undress.

"Then what are you waiting for? Do something!"

Ami turned toward the pool and mimed a lifting motion with her right

hand. The liquid in the basin frothed as if was boiling, and a big, green and black lump broke the surface. It continued rising into the air, resembling spaghetti dangling from a fork. Tentacles writhed and dripped as a multitude of eyes in the main mass turned to face the blue-haired girl.

"Tserk! What have I told you about the pools?" Ami asked, arms akimbo and glaring up at the creature.

"Don't scare the other bathers?" the tentacle monster replied, doing its best to sound innocent.

"Exactly! And what do I catch you doing?"

"Now wait a moment!" Tserks many pseudopodia flailed around, and a set of three pointed back at the albino stomping furiously toward the shore. *"Did she look* scared *to you, your Majesty?"*

Ami blinked. The elf had looked as if she was about to cut a few of Tserk's appendages off, not frightened. "That's not the point! You know what I meant!"

"Not seeing it," the tentacled creature muttered like a stubborn child.

"Mercury? Can you actually communicate with that thing?" Sailor Moon's incredulous voice asked from the crystal ball.

"You can't hear it? Oh, of course you can't. The crystal ball probably doesn't transmit telepathy," Ami explained. "Yes, it can talk, and is actually quite intelligent." She turned back to Tserk and shot him a glare "Certainly intelligent enough to understand what I mean when I give an order!"

The monster's tentacles went limp like the branches of a weeping willow. Somehow, the ball of pseudopodia and eyes managed to pull off a chagrined expression. *"Forgive me, your Majesty, but I was feeling very down lately. Nobody is letting me give them a massage.*" It's mental voice suddenly became hopeful. *"Perhaps you could use a nice and relaxing one?"*

Truthfully, Ami was feeling a bit tense after all the stress she had been under during the past days. She nodded. "Maybe later." With a

quiet pop of inrushing air, Tserk disappeared.

The dark elf, in the process of leaving the pool and wrapping a towel around her body, drew attention to herself by missing a step and making the water splash loudly. Her head whipped to the left to gape at Ami with red pupils that had shrunk to the size of pinpricks from surprise. The dark elf continued staring for a long moment, as if seeing the blue-haired girl in an entirely new light.

The young Empress wondered if she shouldn't critically evaluate her behaviour in the near future if she had managed to shock someone like the clingy elf woman. Sure, a short application of the Avatar's mantle had undone the mental conditioning that Morrigan had inflicted on her, but she was still more forward and grabby than poor Snyder was comfortable with.

"-what? What did it say? Mercury!" The others had obviously noticed the albino's reaction, and Sailor Moon was loudly voicing their shared curiosity about the part of the conversation they were missing.

"Oh. It offered me a massage," Ami answered calmly.

"What? And you accepted?" Sailor Mars managed not to shout. Barely.

"Well, it is talented at it." A pause. "Why are you all looking at me like that?" Ami had been the target of that kind of stare before, usually when she had suggested studying instead of doing something unproductive and time-wasting, such as visiting the Crown arcade.

"Sailor Mercury. That's a *tentacle monster*," the pig-tailed blonde said slowly, as if explaining things to a child.

"So? It's perfectly harmless. A weird fairy trained it," Ami dismissed their concerns. "There's nothing to be concerned about."

"Mercury, I'm beginning to worry about you," Luna said, shaking her head.

"So what did you do with the monster?" Sailor Mars tried to steer the

topic back on safer paths.

"Oh, I sent it over to the guys' side."

"There's a guy's side?" Sailor Jupiter perked up and reached toward the crystal ball, her eyes gleaming. "Ow!" The brunette pulled her hand back, shooting a sour look at the cat sitting protectively in front of the scrying device, one paw raised and her claws extended.

"No peeking!" Luna ordered, frowning at the green-eyed girl as well as her cat face allowed her to.

"No fun," the green-skirted sailor senshi complained, and pointed her thumb at the orb. "She can do it whenever she wants to!"

Ami froze like a deer in the headlight. "What? No, I can't- I mean I could, but I wouldn't!" she sputtered, turning as red as her eyes.

Sailor Moon brought her face so close to the crystal ball that her nose almost touched its curved surface. "Oh? Not even when Jadeite is in there?" She asked with a stage whisper.

"Oh, look, she's blushing even harder," Sailor Mars said, "I think you struck a nerve!"

"You didn't, Mercury!" Luna shouted, sounding scandalised.

"Guuuyyys," Ami whined, looking down and covering her cheeks with her hands to hide their colour, "please stop teasing me!"

"Sorry, Mercury," her friends laughed. At least they didn't ask any more uncomfortable questions, or point out that she hadn't actually denied the accusation. Nevertheless, Ami felt that changing locations might be in her best interest.

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Gauging the Opposition

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"Next, I'd like to show you the dungeon heart," Ami said into the crystal ball floating in her telekinetic grip, "but since that might be giving away its location, I'll instead show you one of the fakes I made to confuse invaders." Now that she was off the iceberg, she had so much room that it would have been stupid to not copy Malleus' idea. The teenager grimaced inwardly as she was reminded of the desert Keeper and the stomach-turning, and now thankfully dulled, memories that she had burdened herself with.

She appeared on the elevated stone platform on which the fake dungeon heart rested, her slender figure looking small next to the crystal sphere. Even though it was a fake, its rumbling heartbeat dominated the atmosphere in the small chamber, making the walls vibrate from the intensity of the sound. Each pulse of white light stretched out Ami's shadow grotesquely and cast it onto the steel-reinforced surfaces of the room.

Sailor Mars blinked. "So the source of your powers looks just like that?"

"It's pretty," Sailor Moon said, sounding surprised.

Made of crystal, encircled with bands of gold, and topped with a huge, cut gem, the orb supported by the bent backs of three gilded troll statues exuded a certain air of refinement and majesty. Ami had to agree that the crystal hearts disguised their abominable nature much better than the fleshy, pulsating organic hearts. Resting on an elevated dais and framed by four sturdy pillars, the crystal version was clearly designed to impress.

Ami waited for the pause between two thunderous heartbeats and explained "I assume it is meant to symbolise the Keeper's power and glory. Many Keepers hire new recruits by bringing them to the dungeon heart, rather than meeting them personally."

"But you don't?" Sailor Jupiter asked.

"That would defeat the point of making fakes," the blue-haired girl replied with a smile. "Besides, I'm cramming as many traps as I can into the passages leading to these things."

Sailor Moon's face turned curious and she frowned in concentration. Ami had come to associate the expression with the blonde shifting around the viewpoint of her crystal ball. "I don't see any traps," she admitted after a while.

"I'm glad. It means they are good traps," Ami said. "Here, I'll show you one." She raised her black-gloved right hand and snapped her fingers.

With a deafening clang, a section of the ceiling that looked no different from the rest slammed down, sealing off the only passage out of the chamber.

Ami's face turned serious. "And now, any invader attacking the heart would be trapped in here, unless they could teleport or get through thick steel walls enchanted to resist melting. And I can make life very unpleasant for anyone trapped in here."

"Can you give an example?" Luna asked.

Ami nodded, and the room lit as if an aquamarine sun had risen inside. Its metal walls reflected and amplified the light from the spells the blue-haired girl had retrieved from storage and suspended in the air. She stumbled, startled by the sudden brightness, and rubbed her eyes. "Maybe that was overdoing it a little," she said, hiding her mouth behind her hand. The light disappeared and her red-glowing eyes reopened. "As you can see, I can cast spells into this place from wherever I am, or bring other objects here. It is not a good place for my enemies to be trapped in."

The girls nodded uneasily at that, probably wondering how *they* could get out of a situation like that if the Dark Kingdom had similar defences.

"After what happened before, I'm taking my security seriously," Ami

continued. "Still, my advisers tell me that I need to start relying more on my troops than on traps alone, especially now that my territory is expanding."

"Good advice. You should not try to do everything yourself," Luna agreed. "That will only wear you out. If you have people you can trust, then you should let them help you."

"I'm curious to see what kinds of creatures are working for you," Sailor Mars said. "Are most of them as," the raven-haired girl searched for a non-insulting word for a moment, "exotic as that tentacle beast?"

"The majority isn't," Ami said. "Venna - the woman you saw earlier in the baths, was a dark elf, for example. They have good night vision and are very accurate with their crossbows. Come along, I'll show you some of the others."

Ami took the scenic through the more public sections of her dungeon, a spring in her step as she walked instead of teleporting. With high ceilings and straight corridors meeting at right angles, the architectural style of her dungeon wasn't the most elaborate around, but she was fairly sure it was unique in its colour scheme. She doubted that marble-like whites for the walls and light blue and white chequerboard-patterns for the floor were very popular among other Keepers. In regular intervals, square pillars topped with a horizontal bar reinforced the hallway, reminiscent of wooden supports in a mine.

"...and I made the tunnels so wide because some of the creatures can get quite large," the black-clad Keeper explained, spreading her arms to show that her fingertips could not touch either of the side walls. The generous dimensions of the passage combined with the vaulting ceiling to create an illusion of openness.

"What's the largest creature you have?" Sailor Moon asked with interest.

"Right now? A horned reaper. I used to have a small dragon for a

while, but it didn't come back when I abandoned the desert dungeon and moved to the iceberg."

"D-dragon? I'd be running in fright from half of the things working for you," the pig-tailed blonde admitted. "How did you get used to it?"

"I haven't rally," Ami confessed. "It helps that I know they can't harm me, but some of them..." she trailed off, suppressing a shiver. The cold, dead eyes of her vampires flashed through her mind.

"Um, Mercury," Sailor Mars said, sounding curious, "why did you add those murals?"

Ah yes, the bas-reliefs of stylised demonic creatures of either gender, often showing them with intertwined limbs. "I don't get a choice about those," Ami said, faintly embarrassed by the designs. Some of the engravings were rather risqué, but fortunately, they didn't cross the border into the obscene. She was rather glad about that, since some of them were supposed to represent her own exploits. "When the imps fortify walls, they include them, and I can't persuade them otherwise."

"Make them clean them away," Jupiter suggested pragmatically.

"I tried that," Ami said as she walked past a picture of a short-haired, slender female crossing scythes with a huge horned demon. While too simplistic to make out facial features or details of the body, it just had to refer to her duel in Azzathra's arena. As if she *wanted* to be reminded about that. "The fortification magic breaks if I do," she sighed. "Sometimes, I think it's the dungeon heart making me pay for preferring well-lit, orderly rooms."

"I think it looks- huh? Was that a rat?" Luna was suddenly in front of the crystal ball, her tail twitching excitedly. An instant later, she backed off and sat down, trying to look dignified.

Ami giggled, covering her mouth. "That's all right, Luna, they are pets of a sort." She raised her right hand, open palm facing upwards, and flexed her mind.

An instant later, a grey-skinned rodent appeared on her hand,

standing on its hind legs as it sniffed in the direction of the crimson-eyed girl's face.

"See the little belt and the square block on its back? It's one of my workers." She gently stroked the rat's head with one finger before sending it back to its cage. "It probably escaped from the beastmaster. I don't use the rats much now that I have the imps, but I wouldn't have been able to make any progress without them. And the beastmaster is a goblin," she answered the unasked question she was sure would have followed. "You'll see some soon."

Ahead, voices groaning from exertion and metallic thuds spilled from a half-open doorway. Ami's friends were spared the smell of sweaty goblin that permeated the air, growing thicker the closer she got to the door of the training hall.

As soon as she stepped into the room, rows of green humanoids wielding scythes and wearing loincloths stopped what they were doing and turned to face her. Letting themselves get distracted wasn't the wisest course of action, since one of the exercises included dodging heavy punching backs swinging back and forth on a rope suspended from the ceiling.

Ami winced when two goblins went rolling across the floor following two meaty thuds. One landed in front of her, looking up cross-eyed. From her crystal ball, she could hear Sailor Jupiter snicker.

"Please continue what you are doing," Ami said before her arrival could cause more of a mess.

"You heard her, back to work!" a loud, female voice shouted from behind Ami. With a few deft steps, Cathy loomed before her. "Hello. Are you here to catch up on your training sessions? You already missed two with all the excitement of the last days!"

Ami shrank back, disconcerted by the mischievous gleam in the eyes of the undisputed mistress of the training room.

Whenever the blonde, who towered one and a half heads over Ami, had that particular look in her eyes, the next training exercise promised to get rather uncomfortable for the target.

I'm almost glad I no longer have a dragon. Thinking quickly, Ami grabbed her crystal ball and thrust it into the swordswoman's face. "Cathy, this are my friends Sailor Moon, Sailor Mars, Sailor Jupiter, and Luna. Everyone, this is Cathy, the commander of my forces and chief trainer of the troops. She has been with me almost from the beginning, and I wouldn't be here today without her."

The ploy worked, and the blonde inspected the glowing orb curiously instead of plotting a merciless assault on Ami's muscles. "Hello there. How are you?"

The girls in Tokyo returned the swordswoman's look with just as much curiosity, partially due to the sailor senshi uniform she was wearing.

"Thank you for keeping Sailor Mercury safe," Luna was the first to speak.

Cathy boggled, her jaw dropping. "Talking cat!"

"I'm a moon cat, not a regular cat," Luna pointed out. "I'm sure Mercury has at least mentioned me?"

The swordswoman nodded slowly. "Oh yes, how stupid of me to forget. That's truly enough to make a cat unexpectedly speaking to you for the first time completely unsurprising."

"Miss Cathy? Why are you wearing Sailor Mercury's regular uniform?" Sailor Mars asked, tearing her gaze away from the sight of dozens of goblins striking at wooden practice dummies.

While the tall blonde's uniform had seen better days and was decidedly non-standard due to the leggings and armoured greaves that Cathy wore underneath the short skirt, it still looked more like Sailor Mercury's uniform than the black variant that Ami was wearing.

"Mainly because it's something people think I'd never wear, so nobody will connect me with my untransformed identity. Working directly underneath a Keeper doesn't look good on a resume," she answered with a grin.

"I didn't know we could transfer our powers to other people?" Sailor Jupiter asked, looking at Luna.

"You can't," the black feline answered. "That's something unique to Sailor Mercury's situation." Shaking her head, the cat muttered "I'd never have expected one of you girl possessing someone else to become an issue."

"Yes," Ami agreed. "It's not really a transfer of powers, either, it's more like Cathy borrowing some of my abilities. I'm still maintaining and fuelling all the powers she uses myself."

"Those enchantments are really great," Cathy commented, "the enhanced speed, strength, and toughness are incredibly useful for warriors. It's too bad that she has so little training, but I'm remedying that slowly but certainly."

"Hmm." Luna's ears twitched, moving to point at the blonde. "Would you be willing to tutor the girls here too? While they fight mostly at long range, I'd feel better if they knew how to defend themselves if an enemy got close, too."

Cathy stared intently into the scrying device, giving each of the three senshi the once over. She scratched the scar running down her right cheek as she pondered her options. "Well, I'm not sure how effective actual combat training can be from a distance, but I'm willing to try. Dodging exercises at least can be easily arranged," she glanced over at the goblins collecting bruises as they tried to make their way through an obstacle course full of swinging bags. "No need to be gentle about it either, these enchantments protect from a lot of damage. Yes. Endurance training should work out fine too. A long run every day. Or even better, combine the two. Run while dodging! Of course, some strength training to get muscles on those scrawny-"

Sailor Moon let out a whimper. "Mercury!" she interrupted in a pleading voice, "weren't you in a hurry to show us the rest of the rest of the dungeon?"

The blue-haired girl stood no chance against the watery puppy-dog eyes her friend was unashamedly bringing to bear on her. "Well, I suppose that's true."

Cathy's face lit up as she turned to Ami. "Oh, right, we haven't re-scheduled your own training sessions either-"

"No time right now! Need to show my friends the rest of the place," Ami blurted out, and her slightly panicked face vanished behind a swirl of snowflakes.

"And this is my favourite room!" Ami announced cheerfully, after having shown the others the kitchen, her farms, and part of the iceberg.

"I should have known," Sailor Moon groaned when she caught sight of the well-stocked bookshelves that reached up to the ceiling, separating the room into different sections.

Luna and Sailor Mars nodded mutely, completely unsurprised, while Sailor Jupiter tilted her head to the side.

"Ah, my Empress!" the short-bearded warlock Torian arrived from around a corner and headed straight for Ami, a winning smile on his face. He bowed deeply, holding his arm across his chest in a gesture obviously copied from Jadeite. "What brings us the pleasu-"

"EMPRESS?" four voices from the crystal ball shouted, cutting him off rather effectively.

"You are calling yourself an Empress now?" Luna asked, her voice slightly reproachful. She narrowed her eyes at the blue-haired girl. "Are you sure you aren't getting into all of this a little too much?"

Interrupted in his spiel, the ignored purple-wearing mage shifted mental gears when he saw the slight flush on his young liege's face. He sneered at the floating crystal ball as he took a step closer and leaned over it. "And who are you to to question Her Imperial Majesty Sailor Mercury of the Avatar Islands?"

"Torian, back off. These are my team mates." Ami was not going to let him act snobbishly toward her friends.

"Of course. No offence intended," the warlock back-pedalled. "I

should have noticed immediately from your attire. A regrettable oversight." The gold medallion dangling from his neck jingled as he bowed quickly in the orb's direction, though shallower than to Ami before. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Torian, Imperial chief research-"

He was interrupted again, this time by a spray of colourful sparks shooting across the room from behind one of the shelves and raining down on one of the work benches cluttered with scrolls and open tomes. A robed man with a grey, scorched beard ran past, juggling a forearm-long wand in his hands as if it was a hot potato. "The box! The warded box! Where did you put it, you bastards?" he screamed before disappearing behind another bookshelf.

By now, the wide eyed girls noticed that the other warlocks in the room were cowering behind furniture, their starched collars poking out from behind tables and stacks of tomes like shark fins from the sea.

The runner's high-pitched shouts cut off abruptly when a blast of rainbow sparkles came from the direction he had disappeared into, accompanied by a whooshing noise. Some of the other wizards in the room smirked and snickered.

"What happened? Is he all right?" Sailor Moon asked, wide-eyed.

"He's alive and uninjured," Ami confirmed, her link to the dungeon heart informing her of his status the moment she focused on it. From the corner of her eyes, she noted Torian walk off to have a look at the results of the disaster, taking care not to step into one of the sizzling, colourful marks on the carpet.

"Does that kind of thing happen often around here?" Sailor Mars asked when the lighting in the room returned to boring whites and yellows produced by lamps resting on corkscrewing brass pedestals.

"Exasperatingly so," Ami confirmed, letting the thin, wobbly shield that had appeared around her fade away. "This isn't just a library, it's also where my warlocks conduct research." She underlined her words by gesturing toward one of the shelves stuffed not with books, but with glass retorts, tiny crucibles, and similar lab equipment.

"Though they aren't supposed to try out new spells in here."

Torian returned with a white-bellied red frog sitting on his palm. Strangely enough, the amphibian was wearing a small warlock's robe and a scorched wizard's hat. "I'm afraid old Stavers here managed to turn himself into a frog."

The animal let out a mournful croak.

Ami heard several sharp intakes of breath from the crystal ball. "It will wear off on its own in a few minutes," she said after watching the victim of the magical accident through her visor. She touched her right earring with her index finger, dispelling the device. "Actually, please figure out if you can reproduce that effect as some potion or pill, please."

"As you desire, my Empress." Torian acknowledged, bowing once again.

"Excuse me? What do you need a potion to turn people into frogs for, Mercury?" Jupiter asked, sounding justifiably suspicious.

"I recently fought an enemy Keeper who had a spell to bring all of my employees to a battlefield of his choice. I analysed the magic and found out that it only works on creatures above a certain size," Ami explained. "If everyone carried a potion like that and used it at the right time, then the spell would be essentially harmless."

"Brilliant as usual, my Empress! Your genius is truly beyond compare," Torian congratulated with a wide grin that bared his gleaming white teeth.

"How did this happen in the first place?" Ami wanted to know, pointing at the frog and ignoring the flattery.

"Oh, we are all very enthusiastic about working with the dragon materials you have so cunningly secured for us, your Majesty. Our motivation when working with the materials you have so generously provided is so high that some shared tools can get misplaced in our zeal to perform beyond your expectations!"

"He's laying it on a bit thick, isn't he?" Sailor Mars commented.

Torian's smile became strained. "Your Majesty, would you mind controlling your *team mates*? They are clad similarly to you, but lack the marks of arcane accomplishments. Certainly, you are the leader of the group?"

Ami shook her head. "No, actually. I act purely in a support and analysis role."

Torian looked incredulous. "If I may ask, why is that so?"

"Because I'm the weakest senshi of them," Mercury said simply. Behind her, she heard someone drop a book. Oh, great, everyone was eavesdropping now.

Torian looked as if he had bit into a lemon, and let his eyes wander back to the glowing orb. None of the girls in it looked too happy with him. A thin film of sweat formed on his brow.

"In fact, none of my powers were able to even harm the enemies we were fighting," Ami continued, feeling slightly mischievous.

"I- I see." Torian's fingers developed a nervous twitch. "By your leave, I shall return to my experiments. It would not do to leave them unsupervised for too long."

The blue-haired girl magnanimously inclined her head, and the paling warlock fled at the fastest pace his dignity would allow.

"That was evil, Mercury," Sailor Mars snickered. "Amusing, though. You don't like him much?"

"He's competent enough," Ami said, "but his persistent, heavy-handed attempts to curry favour get tiresome after a while. This is the fastest I have ever been able to get rid of him," she said, joining the giggles.

"Let's get back to this 'Empress' thing," Luna declared. "What possessed you to name yourself that? I hope the power isn't getting to your head!"

Ami looked hurt and wrung her hands. She glanced around, aware that she was still the centre of attention. "Not here. Follow me."

When Ami reappeared, it was underneath a rock outcropping that shielded her from the torrential downpour falling from the thick, dark clouds in the sky above. Out here in her own territory, far away from prying eyes, she could talk freely and explain the situation better at the same time. "It wasn't my idea to declare myself empress," she began, "I got the title bestowed on me by the Light gods when I defeated their champion. I know that sounds bad, but I was only defending myself at the time!"

"So why would they make you empress for something like that?" Sailor Jupiter asked.

"Well, I let him - the Avatar, that is - go, of course," Ami explained. "The Light gods gave me the title so that the Keepers and Underworld denizens would think that I ransomed him back for this rise in status. Otherwise, they would have come after me for being a traitor. I don't really think of myself as an empress," she finished.

"So the title is real." Luna sounded stunned. "I'm not sure what to think about that."

"I think it's amazing!" Sailor Moon cheered. "Our Mercury is real royalty now!" She paused, and her eyes went wide."Hey, if Sailor Mercury is a real empress now, can we substitute her if we don't find the Moon Princess?"

"Don't be silly, meatball head!" Sailor Mars said.

"Absolutely not!" Luna shouted at the same time, glaring at the pigtailed blond. "This isn't just about a title! The Moon Princess is the only one who can defeat the Dark Kingdom, I'm sure of it," she stated, voice brimming with conviction. "Ahem." Her ears drooped a bit. "If I could only remember why."

As Moon and Mars started bickering, Sailor Jupiter looked around the blackened landscape, where rain turned to steam on jagged rocks. "So... the Light gods thought an empress needed land, too, so they gave you a nice, rainy piece of hell to rule?"

Ami scratched the back of her head. "Hell? I know this place looks pretty bad, but what gave you that idea?"

Wide-eyed, the brunette pointed a shaky finger at something that was approaching rapidly. "Well, to me that looks *exactly* like the devil chasing the souls of the damned around some fiery lakes!"

"Huh?" Jupiter's outburst was enough to catch the attention of the others.

Ami turned in the indicated direction, and immediately spotted what the green-skirted girl was referring to. "Oh, that's just my horned reaper clearing the area of ghosts. Well, he is a demon," she admitted, "but this continent is not hell. It would almost be better if it was," she said with a heavy sigh as she returned her attention to the crystal ball. "This used to be a normal, living continent full of life and people and cities before the Keepers came, murdered everything, and poisoned the land."

Everything was silent for a while, aside from the constant patter of the raindrops on rock. Ami slowly unclenched her fists and raised her head. "But I hope I'll at least be able to restore the land, eventually. Since the corruption of the dungeon hearts is magical in nature, I think the toxins in the ground will fade into nothingness once I stop the corruption from sustaining them. I doubt very much that the Keepers paid gold to make it real."

"If anyone can find a way to do it, it's you," Sailor Moon encouraged her friend. "With your farms- Mercury, watch out!" she finished, her voice shrill.

Startled, Ami looked at the orb instead of heeding the warning. She saw movement reflected in its curving glass, but before she could react, something huge and menacing was behind her. Muscular arms that felt as if they were made of steel wrapped around her with crushing force, pinning her arms to her sides.

"Eeep!" Ami screamed in surprise as she felt herself lifted off the ground and twirled around in a circle, her legs almost horizontal from the centrifugal force. An instant later, her assailant let go, and she dropped back onto the ground, her knees wobbly. Eyes round and

hair standing on end, Ami whirled around just in time to watch Rabixtrel jump off the cliff and resume his chase.

"What was that all about?" Sailor Mars demanded to know.

Gulping back in the air that had been driven from her lungs by the bone-crushing hug, Ami shrugged her shoulders and blinked in confusion. "He's - happy, I think?"

"Ohh, he's hot!" Sailor Jupiter exclaimed as she caught her first glimpse of Jadeite through the crystal ball. "I can see why you fell for him."

"Jupiter! Did you just use the crystal ball to spy on Jadeite in his bedroom?" Ami asked as a rather hostile feeling toward the tall brunette welled up in her. The blue-haired senshi was sitting at the desk in her own bedroom, eyes flaring bright crimson as she stared at the scrying device.

"Well, you did tell us we couldn't talk to him because he was sleeping, and I was curious," the green-skirted girl said, not very apologetic at all.

"Please respect his privacy!" Ami managed to say through clenched teeth.

"Yes, give that thing back," Sailor Mars agreed with her blue-haired friend and took the orb away from the taller senshi with a quick grab. "Besides, he's a dark general!"

"So? All of them so far have been gorgeous," the pony-tailed girl pointed out, undeterred.

"It's too bad they are all evil," Sailor Moon agreed wistfully.

"Sailor Moon, don't be greedy! Or are you giving up on Tuxedo Mask, then?" the red-skirted senshi reprimanded her friend.

"No way! He's mine!"

As the girls playfully argued with each other, Luna seized the orb. "Sailor Mercury, I'm still unhappy about you working with a dark general, but what's done is done. Are you sure you can trust Jadeite to do only what you want him to?"

"Yes!" she exclaimed immediately. She really wished she was as certain as she had sounded, but since she was a very honest girl, she continued "I - well, he ignored one of my instructions when the Avatar invaded. But it was only to protect me!" she excused his actions quickly as she detected the disapproval on the moon cat's face. Truth be told, she hadn't be thrilled by him using excessively lethal force against the champion of Light, but had let it pass since nothing bad had happened in the end, and because it had been for her benefit. Nevertheless, a tiny sliver of worry remained in the back of her mind.

"Sailor Mercury," Luna sighed, shaking her head slowly. "Still, I trust you to know what you are doing. Just be careful, okay?"

"I will," Ami said seriously.

"I also want to question him thoroughly when he wakes up," the moon cat continued. "He may have useful information you haven't thought to ask him about yet."

"I'll arrange that," Ami agreed. "Luna," she began after a pause, not looking at the crystal ball. Instead, she was letting her gaze wander over her bedroom, modelled to resemble her apartment so much that homesickness threatened to overwhelm her. "I want to talk to my mother!"

The other senshi fell silent, now listening in attentively. Luna sat down. "I can understand that," the cat said. "It's only natural. What exactly do you want to tell her, though?"

Ami looked up, meeting Luna's gaze head on. "That I am alive and well," she stated simply. "I'm not going to make her worry even more about me by mentioning the problems with my soul or the danger surrounding me, but I will tell her that I'm learning magic to find a way home."

"Are you sure you want to reveal even that much?" Luna cautioned. "That's a big decision. If she knows you can do some magic, she might also deduce more on her own..."

"After all the anguish my disappearance has caused her, she deserves to know at least that," the blue-haired girl said with steel in her voice. "I don't think I'll be able to keep myself from revealing my abilities to her when I get home anyway," Ami confessed. "With the healing magic I learned, I couldn't just stand by idly if I could help so many people instead. This is too important not to share, and I will need her help!"

"We'll support that decision," Sailor Moon promised.

Sailor Mars nodded, for once in perfect agreement with her blonde friend.

Sailor Jupiter smiled too, but it was a sadder smile than that of her companions. "It's good to have a trusting relationship with your parents while you still can."

"Very well then. We'll work out a time we can visit her and let you know," Luna said without further protests.

Ami clapped her hands together in happiness, the red light in her eyes dimming to a bluish shade of violet. "Thank you! Thank you so much!"

Until the Tokyo senshi had to split up and go home, the conversation turned to lighter topics. Ami learned about the newest gossip and entertained her friends with anecdotes from her time here. The goblins and their antics featured prominently in her more amusing tales.

Warlocks and even a vampire prostrated themselves on the cold, smooth floor tiles in front of the warped stone skull in Ami's temple to Metallia. They murmured prayers directed at the large, warped stone skull in the wall whose gemlike eyes shimmered with a violet

glow. The Keeper's unannounced arrival by teleport disturbed the wafting swathes of fog and incense just as effectively as her words destroyed the atmosphere of quiet meditation. "All right, everyone, out! The temple is off limits to everyone while I'm using it, is that understood?"

The robed worshippers jumped to their feet, hurrying past the delicate, mushroom-like pillars encircling the structure's central basin in their haste to evacuate the area. Ami would never use anyone as a sacrifice, but they didn't know that, and were therefore disinclined to stick around. The young Keeper waited until she could no longer hear their retreating footsteps. Strangely enough, the echoes of their muttered prayers could still be heard from above the hypnotic waters in the central pool.

Ami suppressed a shiver and summoned Snyder, taking care to transport the acolyte onto a spot just outside the borders of the dark temple. She greeted him with a polite smile. "I'm really grateful that you are willing to help me with this."

"It makes sense to get as much information as possible on the dark goddess Metallia," the redhead said. "Know your enemy."

On his arms rested the folded-up mantle of the Avatar, held with such reverence that Ami almost felt bad about her imp experiments. Almost. Her instincts insisted that she should toss the object into the most remote volcano she could find, or at least get away from it. It was hard to feel chagrined about not treating something like that with the respect it was due. *I hope I won't feel the same way about Usagi's moon tiara when I get home.* "That's true. Still, don't take any risks. Step away the moment you suspect that something is wrong."

"I will have the very best possible protection for this," Snyder reassured her as he slowly unfolded the mantle and draped it over his shoulders. The short, portly man had to stand on tiptoes so the silver-runed seams didn't trail in the dust.

"I'm just glad I have you to negotiate for me with the Light gods," Ami said. "I could have asked Snyder or Cathy, but you are trained for the job."

The acolyte smoothed his bowl cut with his fingers. "Indeed. Tough in this particular case, not much convincing was necessary. The Gods are just as eager to learn more about the capabilities of a potential enemy than you are. It is not every day that They get uncontested access to a dark god's temple to perform Their investigations."

"Understood. Please proceed as soon as you are ready."

Snyder nodded and took a step forward, setting foot onto the dark, polished tiles of the temple proper. Taking a deep breath, he stepped toward the basin and sat down in front of it, just close enough that he could touch the not-water with the tip of a long wooden staff he held in both hands. He closed his eyes and breathed slowly, and Ami watched in fascination as a white glow appeared around his finger and crept down the wood, causing it to sprout new leaves. An instant later, the pure light travelling down reached the partially submerged part, and a soft ripple pulsed over the oily-shimmering surface of the liquid.

Ami tensed, ready to act if the temple reacted in any unforeseen way to the probe. She hoped that the Light gods, acting through the mantle, could get at least a glimpse of the Dark Kingdom's supreme ruler. She needed more information! *I have to know if my plan even has a chance at success before I can commit to it!*

Despite Ami's fears that Metallia could somehow detect or react to the probe, nothing happened. After a minute or two, Snyder let go of the staff, which was quickly swallowed by the pool. With a few deft steps, the acolyte was back on safe ground. Ami backed away when he approached, which caused him to hesitate and look confused. A glance down reminded him of the reason. "Oh, of course. The mantle." He removed the garment and handed it to a waiting imp.

Ami transported both of them back to the living room. Discussing ways to oppose Metallia near her own temple would be unwise, even if she was comatose. The blue-haired girl's intensely red gaze remained on Snyder. She barely managed to restrain her curiosity until he had taken a seat. "Well? Does the Light think that adamantine will be effective against her?"

The acolyte nodded once. "Limited by the need for secrecy and by acting outside of Their domain, They had some difficulty gauging precisely how much power the dark goddess would have at her disposal if she was restored to a fully functional state. Even under optimal conditions, judging the might of a dark god is an inaccurate art, and in this case, there was additional interference."

"Interference?" Ami leaned forward in her chair.

"Despite appearances, she has not sunken back into quiescence," the acolyte pointed out involuntarily lowering his voice.

Ami gripped the armrests of her chair so hard the wood creaked underneath her grip. Her lips tightened into a straight, pale line. "She is awake?"

The white-and-red robed acolyte raised his hands in a placating gesture. "While aware, she remains too damaged to take the initiative. As the Light put it, she is currently fully occupied by doing the metaphysical equivalent of regurgitating a shard of the Mighty Tyrant that is incompatible with her essence. Its own emanations obstructed observation of the primary target to some degree," the redhead explained.

"Wait, she ate Azzathra?" the blue-haired teenager gasped, her heart beating faster. *Couldn't have happened to someone more deserving!*

Snyder shook his head. "No, Azzathra is alive and well, unfortunately. My initial reaction was identical to yours, and I asked the very same question. As the Light explained, it is not uncommon for battling dark gods to shape tiny slivers of their own power into disruptive weapons that they thrust into their opponents. Costly, but effective."

Disappointed, Ami filed the potentially useful information away for later. "So they fought, and that's why she went quiet. Azzathra almost did me a favour there. Hmm. But let's get back to the adamantine. Can I count on it working against her?"

"At the Light's educated guess, a restored Metallia could draw upon

at least as much power as any four members of the dark pantheon put together." His rounded cheeks lost some colour at the thought. "Which is, apparently, well within the limits of what adamantine can deal with."

"Good!" Ami felt the muscles around her shoulders relax in relief, not only because now she knew she had a (small) fighting chance, but also because that meant that it was unlikely that another dark god could destroy Metallia and claim the young Keeper's soul as spoils of the battle. Still, the thought of having to face something like that... Even the presence of Azzathra alone had felt like an infinite ocean of focused malevolence bearing down on her. Ami suppressed a whimper has she wrapped her arms around herself. How much worse would Metallia be if she was so much stronger than the dark god of brute force, bullying and tyranny?

But, if that wonder metal still works... "Snyder, how do the Light gods compare to Metallia?"

"They did not mention," the redhead said, shrugging. "Considering that They are at constant war with the dark gods, of which there are more than four, I severely doubt that They are overly concerned about Their *Own* safety."

"I see." Ami wondered briefly what her and her friends' chances against the Dark Kingdom would have been if she hadn't been sent here, and didn't like the answer she came up with. She was starting to see why Jadeite thought opposing the Dark Kingdom's ruler was hopeless. Turning her attention to more practical purposes, she asked "How thick would an adamantine shield need to be to protect against her attacks? Or to prevent her from coming in through the temple, in case she wakes up and I need to keep her out?"

"I do not know, but I could ask, if you wish."

"Yes, please do so." Ami raised her hand as a courtesy to Snyder, warning him that she was about to transport him.

An instant later, he was gone from the room and relocated to the Avatar's mantle waiting in one of the treasure chambers.

Now I only need adamantine.

So far, the only item made of the material that Jered had been able to locate was a small dagger, offered by one of his sources at an exorbitant price. Ami wished the stuff was worth its weight in gold, given its low density. The price the seller asked was closer to its volume in diamonds. Nevertheless, she already knew she would authorise the expense. She really needed to get her hands on a sample.

Her plan to get her soul back was taking on a more concise shape in her mind. First, though, she would finish transcribing her information on dungeon hearts and feed it to the mantle. With new energy, she went to work copying the information on her computer's screen onto regular paper.

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A Better Plan?

Originally on 2011-02-03T22:34:00

"Owwwww." Ami groaned, holding her aching head with both hands. Only her elbows resting on the table before her saved her from slumping forward and slamming her chin into the wooden surface. She glared at the cause of her pain, the straight, blue-glimmering dagger lying on a plate before her.

The metal sparkled as if mocking her.

The red-eyed teenager was too mild-mannered to growl in frustration, even in the solitude of her laboratory, and so the faint snarl echoing through the cavern must have been an acoustic illusion. Instead, she clenched her teeth as she resisted the irrational impulse to grab the taunting little weapon and throw it at the wall. It would be wasted effort since it wouldn't even damage the thing. Nothing had so far.

"Mercury, did something explode? The dungeon just shook, and the lights flickered!" Cathy's mental voice reported, sounding tense but professional. Distorted into a dreamlike whisper by the communication spell, her message resonated in Ami's head.

The young Keeper winced as her headache intensified. *"There's nothing to worry about. I just tried something that was rather stupid, in hindsight, and the dungeon heart had a little hiccup,"* Ami sent a telepathic message back. *"There won't be a repeat performance."*

"Oh, that's all right then. Only the dungeon heart having a hiccup." the blonde commented drily. *"Are you trying to get yourself killed? And you just lectured the warlocks about being more careful with their experiments, too!"*

"Cathy, please, not so loud. My head hurts," Ami complained.

"Are you injured?"

"No, but I found out that the feedback from the dungeon heart attempting an invalid operation stings. A lot," Ami explained. *"Fortunately, the pain is receding quickly."*

"Good. So what did you actually do?"

"I tried to copy some adamantine," Ami said, frowning at the dagger before her. *"Rest assured that I'm not going to attempt that again in the foreseeable future."*

She probably wouldn't even have tried that experiment in the first place if she hadn't been so frustrated about wasting three hours researching the substance without making any appreciable progress. The weapon's innocuous-looking material stymied her attempts to discover its secrets, because it was completely opaque to her sensors. However, even without her computer, she had an arsenal of more mundane tests she could run. For example, she now knew that adamantine was light enough to float in water, conducted heat and electricity poorly, and could be attracted by magnets.

More interestingly, from what she could determine, it seemed to be all but indestructible. High temperatures, acids, enough force to break a steel girder - nothing so far had been able to damage the metal. Was it even a metal? It was so hard to gain any insight into the substance when it proved impervious to the usual methods of analysis.

While the confirmation of the material's near-invulnerability was reassuring in a way, it also presented an enormous problem. How was she supposed to work with it if she couldn't shape it? "I'm missing something here," Ami concluded, pacing up and down. "Someone has clearly forged it into this shape. Perhaps it needs to be in raw form?"

She closed her fingers around the haft of the weapon, sliding her thumb appreciatively over the perfectly-smoothed honeycomb pattern engraved into its surface to provide more grip. *At least it doesn't make me shy away like the mantle, despite being allegedly made of dead Light god,* she thought, deciding to look on the bright side of things. She could definitively live without that additional

complication. *It might be simpler to just ask the others what they know about working with adamantine,* she decided.

The watchtower of the village of Sleepymeadows stood on the outskirts of the collection of straw-thatched buildings. Its crenelations reached two stories higher into the sky than that of the next-tallest building, which was the town hall. Since the latter only had two floors, the tower was not particularly impressive, even by local standards. This didn't stop the villagers from taking great pride in the fact that it was a full floor taller than the guard towers of the neighbouring villages.

Mirroring the watchtower's height, a narrow spiral staircase led straight down to a chamber carved into the bedrock. Just as a guardsman on top of the tower was keeping a watchful eye on the surrounding fields and pastures with a telescope, a second guard attentively observed the sensitive instruments that measured vibrations in the ground. In theory.

In practice, Theo considered watching the calm basins, swinging pendulums, and trembling indicators one of the most boring jobs in the world. He wasn't going to take a nap while he was on duty, but he also wasn't going to stare at the hands moving across never-changing charts all the time. That would lead to him falling asleep for sure.

Instead, he reclined on his chair and flipped the pages of a worn booklet, glancing from time to time at the instruments. The introductory treatise on magic belonged to his eldest son, who had already progressed past the basics covered in this manual and was now studying at the academy in the capital. Theo's tongue poked out from his mouth, licking across his stubble-covered upper lip as he concentrated. He snapped his fingers, and the small white light in the ceiling lantern redoubled in intensity. *Got it on the first try this time,* he thought proudly, smiling. *Now what's this noise?*

He listened intently for the feint ringing that sounded just as if he had struck his helmet with a teaspoon. It repeated, and his eyes darted toward the cylindrical chimes hanging from the wall, connected to

one of the vibration-measuring devices clicking away before him. Alarmed, he stood up, put the book aside, and wiped the dust and spider webs off a huge board that covered the right wall. Nervously, he searched the comparison chart for patterns matching the graphs the mechanical instruments were drawing. Once he found them, he paled. Underground digging. Too far away - thank the Light - to get a precise location, but close enough for the small tremors it caused to propagate through the rock and reach this location.

Theo's hands shook. Hadn't Keeper Subfa been spotted in the neighbouring Barony recently? But certainly, the fiend wouldn't spread his forces so thin? The proper authorities needed to be informed immediately! His keys jingled as he approached the dusty cabinet that held a crystal ball for just that purpose. He missed the keyhole twice in his haste, and hoped the orb would still be in good shape. As far as he knew, there hadn't been a need to use it in the last two decades.

"I'll have to talk to the dwarfs, then." Ami said, summarising what she had learned from her advisers. Even the warlocks had confirmed that they knew of nobody else who had ever discovered the secret of shaping adamantine. Somehow, Ami doubted that the dwarfs would be willing to share a methodology they had guarded through the ages with a Keeper. "Baron Leopold has a suit of armour that incorporates the material, doesn't he? How did he acquire it?"

Jered let himself drop onto the living room's couch. Cathy shot him an irritated glance when the furniture's springs bounced from impact, rocking her body and causing her to spill some of her drink. "One of the dwarfish kingdoms awarded it to him as a reward for his heroic exploits during their succession war. Some nasty business about a pretender to the throne backed by a Keeper."

Ami digested that for a while. "So, could I find a dwarfish smith and commission objects from him, for a price?"

Cathy snorted. "I doubt it. No dwarf in good standing would be willing to give a Keeper the time of the day."

"So we'd have to find a criminal?" the blue-haired girl asked, frowning as she considered the problem.

"The only ones who even get the privilege to work with adamantine are the master smiths deep within their mountain homes. Or so rumour says," Snyder dashed her hopes. "However, history suggests that they have an almost unhealthy appreciation for nobility, so your title as an Empress may be an asset here."

"I might have to negotiate with the kingdoms directly, then," Ami said, not discouraged too much by the sceptical expressions that appeared on Cathy's and Jered's faces. "This might be a good thing. I can try to secure a steady supply at the same time."

"How much of the stuff do you need, anyway?" Cathy asked, straightening her back as she leaned forward.

"Um, I can't really tell with any precision without knowing more about its properties. Perhaps enough to fill the treasure chamber?" Ami made an educated guess. The room she was talking about was ten metres wide and of similar depth and height, and could, at her estimation, hold around two hundred tons of the low-density substance.

"Bwah?" Cathy's eyes went wide, and she started coughing violently as she choked on her drink.

Snyder sucked in his breath sharply, and his eyebrows rose.

"That's... quite the impressive amount," Jered commented after a moment of silence. "In fact, that's likely more than the all adamantine items that have ever left the dwarfish strongholds taken together. What could you possibly need that much for?"

"I'd like to know that too," Cathy exclaimed.

"It's a high estimate," Ami said. "I'll probably need less than half of that, but I need to have a large margin of error in case things don't work out the way I need them to."

"Oh, of course. That makes the amount much more reasonable," the swordswoman said, voice dripping with sarcasm. "And you still

haven't told us what you are planning with all of that!"

"Oh, of course!" Ami put her hands together and smiled. "Please keep in mind that this is an idea in its first planning stages. I haven't had the time to do more than the most rudimentary calculations yet, and I still need to conduct a proper feasibility study." Seeing the impatient look on the blonde's face, she continued "Basically, I want to make a dungeon heart from it."

"A dungeon heart." Jered said in a deadpan tone of voice. "Made from adamantine."

Ami nodded, a bright smile on her face.

The wavy-haired man whistled. "Wow. You'll want to keep that one a secret as long as possible," he advised. "It's going to scare a lot of people."

Mercury blinked. "What, why?"

Jered tilted his head to the left and narrowed his eyes at her, as if wondering how this could have escaped her notice. "How do you defeat a Keeper with an invulnerable dungeon heart?"

"Oh." Her smile turned a bit more strained. Yes, it should probably have occurred to her. "That's not why I want one, though."

"In that case, I fail to see the point," Cathy said.

"Well, it's a bit complicated," Ami began. "Feel free to interrupt me if I made some mistake in my reasoning here. Basically, my soul still has to be linked to me in some way through the dungeon heart. Otherwise, I would be dead."

The people in the room nodded wordlessly, agreeing so far.

"You also know what happens when a dungeon heart is destroyed," she said, her voice getting quieter. "My data suggests that any dungeon heart brought into the vicinity of a place where its Keeper had previously lost a dungeon heart would be sucked into the dark god's realm too."

Cathy's puzzled frown disappeared as she latched onto an idea. "Oh, you want to protect yourself from the banishment?"

"That would be a nice side effect if it could be achieved, but it isn't my primary goal. So far, I have developed a theory on why getting pulled in happens. First, only the owner of the heart is banished, which means the effect is selective. Second, well," she turned to look at Snyder, who was absently scratching his chin as he listened to her explanation "Could you please repeat what happens to the owner of a hero heart when it is destroyed?"

"Of course. The texts recovered from Wemos' collection all agree that the unfortunate lord bound to the demolished heart would be summoned to its former location, usually right into a waiting group of enemies," the redhead summarised.

"Exactly. That suggests that the pull neither originates from the dark gods nor their realm. Since the Light confirmed that the hero version is just a crippled variant of my type of dungeon heart, it stands to reason that it, too, steals the user's soul. However, since the hero hearts have no connection to the evil realm, the soul likely remains trapped within."

"You therefore assume that, upon destruction of a dungeon heart, the removed soul attempts to reunite with the body, causing this attraction?" Snyder asked, following the blue-haired girl's train of thought.

"Yes, exactly. It makes sense, doesn't it?" Ami exclaimed, happy that someone else had come to the same conclusions independently.

"Well, actually, I can see several problems with that theory," the white-robed man began. "First, according to you, a lord bound to a hero heart should quite literally stick to it, unable to move away."

"But the dungeon heart is part of the person. As long as it exists, the soul would already be reunited with its body," Ami countered.

Snyder furrowed his brow as he considered the answer. "Admittedly, you would know more about that than I do," he conceded. "Very

well. The second problem is the zone of banishment that remains around the tear in space where a dungeon heart once stood."

"That one is actually quite easily explained. The pull decreases rapidly in function of distance from the tear," Ami replied, having already thought of that herself. "Besides, 'tear in the world' is not quite the right term. That implies that just anything could pass through. It's more the specific link the dungeon heart used to connect Keeper and soul, laid bare."

"Ah, but if the power of the pull drops off with physical distance, then why is the Keeper banished when his dungeon heart first breaks, no matter his location?" The acolyte grinned triumphantly as he pointed out the flaw in Mercury's reasoning.

Ami smiled, finding the intellectual challenge quite enjoyable. "At first glance, that does look like a glaring inconsistency, doesn't it? However, it assumes that the power required to banish the Keeper remains constant at all times. I posit that the destruction of a dungeon heart renders the body temporarily less substantial, making it much easier to move. As evidence, I offer the fact that I passed through intervening matter with no resistance when Zarekos destroyed my heart," she said with a slight shudder at the memory.

"If you are right, then a Keeper who lost a dungeon heart would not necessarily be drawn to the most recently destroyed heart, but to the one closest to his physical location," Jered pondered.

"Jered, I believe you just designed an empirical test. Let's find us a Keeper with more than one heart," his girlfriend suggested with a nasty grin.

"That would be a beneficial experiment, even if the results contradicted Mercury's theories," Snyder agreed. He turned back to look at the black-uniformed teenager. "However, a final problem remains. How does the Keeper manage to return from the realm of the dark gods if the soul keeps tugging at him?"

"It doesn't," Ami said abruptly. "I didn't feel external forces acting on me while I was there, and I don't know why. I'd prefer not to dwell too much on that." She gripped her shoulders with one hand each,

pressing her arms tightly against herself as she shivered.

"All right, all right. We believe you," Cathy said in a soothing voice. "Now, while this all nice to know, it still doesn't explain why you need an adamantine dungeon heart."

"I was getting to that. Assume that the soul and the body exert an attractive force on each other as long as they are not both in the dark gods' realm. The soul must be the more difficult of the two to move, since it's the physical part that gets drawn in. Thus, if I can create an unmoveable physical anchor, I should be able to reel in my soul and take it back that way!"

"Ah, that's great!" Cathy cheered. "Wait, no. I still don't see where your shiny new adamantine dungeon heart comes in. Even if you placed it next to one of those tears, it would just be pulled in, too. So unless all you want is to brain a dark god with it, I don't see how that would help."

"The trick is making it large enough that I can put a regular dungeon heart inside," Ami explained, then waited until the brains of her wide-eyed companions had digested the concept.

"One dungeon heart inside the other? The last time you brought two close together, one of them blew up in your face!" Jered said, blinking rapidly.

"That's the general idea," Ami said. "Since the adamantine heart is invulnerable, it will be able to bear the strain of containing the tear pulling at it from the inside. Thus, my soul will be the part that is less anchored and has to move here."

"That plan sounds completely crazy," Cathy said, shaking her head. "Still, I like it much better than the idea of you having to fight - or worse, serve - some dark god to retrieve your soul. If you think there's a chance it will work, take it!"

"It will be difficult to implement," Jered said with a crooked grin, "but any plan that consists of us amassing riches equivalent to a large hill of gold finds my approval!"

"I agree with the assessment of my colleagues and support this plan, on the condition that you run the details past the Light. I fear you might cause irreparable harm to yourself if even one of your assumptions does not hold."

"I'll do that once I have the details worked out for myself," Ami said. There was an additional complication she hadn't even mentioned yet. Since her dungeon heart couldn't work with adamantine, it wouldn't be able to assist her with the ritual to create the new one. Instead of relying on the complex patterns within her existing hearts, she would have to assemble the new one manually, part by part. Even so, it was still a better plan than summoning Metallia to put her into a box.

Although the latter remained a hidden option with this new plan, even if its primary purpose failed. The adamantine dungeon heart would be an appropriate prison to contain the dark goddess. It was also a nice workaround for the potential danger of Ami dying if her soul was sealed away with the evil deity. Since the container would be a dungeon heart, the connection to her body should not break. *Still, I better don't even mention that backup plan,* Ami thought, feeling somewhat guilty at the deception. There was no way the others would approve of Metallia coming to their world.

"Oh, and Mercury?" Jered said, "If you have time, you should visit the portal and collect the new recruits before they change their minds and wander back out."

"I'll deal with that right away," Ami said, happy to hear that the reopening of the portal had attracted new prospective employees.

"Watch out for a big guy in a black cloak who thinks that skulls make a nice fashion statement," the weasel-featured man called out as his Empress summoned an ice golem to possess. "He creeps me out. Even the other creatures give him a wide berth. In any case, he demanded to talk to you in the name of Crowned Death."

Last edited: Oct 17, 2016

Dark Messenger

Kner shifted from one pink-skinned foot to the other, bored and nervous at the same time. The orc eyed the crowd of fellow monsters milling about in front of the portal with suspicion. He and the other three muscle-bound members of his warband had claimed a natural alcove a bit to the back of the cavern and growled at anyone who dared approach. He'd been part of the Retribution army before it dissolved, and wasn't too keen on trekking all the way back home to his cave on foot. By now, it had probably been plundered anyway. Stupid commanders, couldn't even prevent a portal from being torn down. Getting a well-paying job with Keeper - now Empress - Mercury was a more attractive notion than trying to find another employer willing to hire him. It was probably safer with her than with any other Keeper, too, now that the Avatar was back.

Feeling secure in his temporary shelter, he let his gaze wander over the other creatures waiting for Empress Mercury to acknowledge their presence. He shielded his eyes against the glare of the strange light source that the Dark Empress had affixed to the top of the cavern; an ostentatious display of how much power she could waste for trivial purposes. Personally, he didn't like the brightness, but there were six warlocks staring up at the undoubtedly magical contraption and discussing it, underlining their words with excited gestures. Idiotic spellcasters. They were ruining their night vision, but had the gall to think of themselves as the smart ones.

Other, more cautious or simply less social creatures, remained close to the megaliths forming the portal, pressing their backs against the smoothed rock walls as their gazes darted about. More confident and stupid beings wandered out and sat down on the smoothed ground to wait in relative comfort. Kner could only shake his head at that sort of behaviour. Getting comfortable when surrounded by throngs of potential enemies offended the soldier in him.

"Bet you a gold coin the one with the red-painted face is going to win," a gruff voice to the orc's left said. Mezok, an orcish comrade-in-arms, thrust a brutish arm past Kner's face to point at one of the

two goblins circling each other with daggers out. The little greenskins were bleeding from shallow cuts, but neither seemed ready to back off. "Looks more vicious."

Kner snorted, irritated by how easily his companion let himself be distracted. "Keep watching the exit, you dolt!" Didn't anyone but him realise they were not safe here until they were hired? But no, instead of keeping an eye on their surroundings, many of the monsters had assembled in a circle around the fighters, cheering, jeering, and placing bets on the outcome. The loudest were the two different goblin gangs rooting for their respective champions, howling and brandishing their weapons in reaction to each thrust and dodge within the improvised ring. No discipline. And that was why they were going to fail.

The grey-haired orc felt sure that this wait was all a test to weed out the worthy from the unworthy. Keeper Mercury wouldn't want followers who couldn't even follow simple instructions. For example, her shifty-looking servant who had briefly addressed them had said that the Empress didn't want her servants to fight among each other. He snickered inwardly at the thought of what she was going to do to those unruly goblins. Cowardly little scum, always deserting and leaving their posts.

Still, the wait was nerve-wracking. He glanced at the exit through which the black-armoured man had arrived and left. In front of the heavy steel portcullis stood four of the Empress' demonic metal guards, scythes at ready and featureless faces unreadable. Kner had seen first-hand how hard the black, horned warriors really were to put down. The moment they approached him with hostile intent, he would make a run for it, pride be damned.

There was only one person within the cavern who made his leathery hide crawl more than those emotionless behemoths. A figure almost as tall as the metal guardians stood all alone in the centre of the cavern, facing the guards. Two jawless skulls of some long-snouted kind of animal covered the shoulders of its hooded black robe, and a third hung from its neck like an amulet.

Dark envoy, Kner thought with an irrational shudder. He was glad for the creak of metal that distracted him and kept his mind from

dwelling on the gaunt figure any longer than absolutely necessary. He watched the steel portcullis barring the way into the dungeon proper retract into the ceiling, revealing a short and fragile-looking girl with crimson-glowing eyes behind it. The Dark Empress herself, wearing some sort of tight-fitting black outfit with a short blue skirt that left her legs bare. Kner did a double take when he noticed said legs were made of ice.

"All right, everyone, please stand in two orderly lines and approach me if you want to get hired," the deceptively harmless-looking female said. She sounded rather cheerful and smiled, obviously pleased with the amount of potential recruits waiting in the chamber.

Kner was a bit surprised at the polite, almost shy tone the Keeper was using. Perhaps, he pondered, if you were as powerful as her, you didn't need harsh words to convey your commands. He held no doubt that she *had* given an order, even though she had phrased it more like a request. Eager to make a good impression, he almost sprinted from his position to get a spot at the front of the file while the Empress was still in a good mood. It also helped avoid the jostling further in the back.

As Empress Mercury handed out gold coins with both hands to the hirelings passing her, taking them officially into her service, she continued speaking "Magic users, please follow warlock Torian to my right. If you have talents and skills aside from fighting, register them at Jered's desk to my left. There might be a better-paid job ready for you."

Kner grumbled a bit at that. He was a soldier first and foremost, and quite a good one, in his humble opinion. The two green-skinned trolls in front of him cheered upon hearing the announcement, though. Both fell quiet at the same time, and the orc felt a sudden chill in his bones. The skull-adorned figure he had noticed earlier glided past, following a weirdly-garbed imp. As soon as they had passed, so did the cold feeling. The line continued shuffling forward, and Kner found himself looking forward to seeing his new home.

Having dealt with the influx of new recruits, Ami now could handle

the dark god's emissary without distractions. Her imp had already led the visitor to her audience chamber not far from the entrance. Carved from rock, this new throne couldn't dazzle visitors with myriads of reflections and refractions playing across semi-transparent ice. Instead, it made every effort to intimidate those standing in front of the stairs leading up to the throne, and to make them feel like insignificant worms. Backlit by the light of four large braziers reflecting off the metallic back wall, her marble throne offered the only reprieve from the glare for the squinting eyes of hypothetical visitors.

Ami was sitting on the massive piece of furniture, wrapped in shadows so deep that not much aside from her glowing red eyes was visible, and thought that Jadeite had gone completely overboard when he designed the place. *Still, it had been so nice of him to offer.* Even if the effect of the architecture was about as subtle as a fist to the face. In retrospect, Ami wished her dark general had exercised a bit more restraint. The claw-like protrusions that gave the imposing piece of furniture a jagged appearance were a bit much.

Ami would have liked to project a more approachable image, but didn't want to hurt his feelings by making significant adjustments. There was at least some merit to the arrangement, after all. While her own face remained hidden and unreadable, anyone who stood before her was bereft of concealing shadows, unable to hide facial expressions, and easy to read.

Not that this was actually working on her current visitor. True, the lights had no trouble piercing the darkness underneath the tall figure's black hood, but a blank skull simply had no facial expressions for her to read. Aside from the tattered black robe, the figure's only possession she could see was a three-pronged staff made of spiralling bone.

"Empress Mercury," the skeleton began unasked, expressing neither signs of discomfort nor respect for Ami's position with its body language.

Her ice golem body sat up straighter. *It's confident,* she thought. *Or rather, he is confident.* The skeleton's voice was male. How did a

creature without vocal chords manage to talk, anyway? *I hope his attitude comes from a lack of fear of death, and not because he thinks he has some power over me.*

"I am Taleth, priest of Crowned Death. Your pointless destruction of the undead on this continent greatly angers my Lord! Your petty vengeance against the vampires of this realm in particular has drawn His ire."

No such luck. Ami almost sighed, but managed to maintain her regal façade. Another dark god taking an interest in her actions was just what she needed.

"You are to cease this these foolish activities immediately," the skeleton continued, its voice echoing. Ami got the impression that some of the sound emerged from the two animal skulls decorating his shoulders. "However, my Lord would be willing to forego your well-deserved punishment if you performed a task for him as a token of good faith."

"Such as?" Ami asked, getting a sinking feeling about where this was going. The last time she had negotiated with a dark god, she had ended up in a rigged duel against a horned reaper.

"The Avatar recovered a certain mantle from Keeper Zarekos when he slew him. You, in turn, recovered said artefact from the Avatar, albeit in a much less useful state. It must be profaned and properly reconsecrated to my Master!"

Yes, this wasn't going anywhere that Ami was comfortable with. "What would I need to do?" She asked, buying herself some time to think. She didn't have to fake the curiosity in her voice. *I am probably going to regret asking for the details.* Her mind raced as she tried to remember what she knew about Crowned Death, searching for hints about how he could make her life miserable when she refused.

"It is a trivial task for a Keeper of your abilities," the skeleton said, "you may not have a proper priest of Crowned Death in your service to conduct the ceremony, but your horned reaper is an acceptable substitute. Simply kill Light worshippers on top of the mantle from

sundown to midnight. The delay between deaths must be no longer than it takes for the heart of the latest sacrifice to stop beating. In addition, their blood must soak the fabric of the mantle."

Ami's breath caught as her mind immediately calculated the number of victims required for the monstrous ritual. Several thousand, at the very least. The population of a medium town or two. Her eyes flared bright red, and she couldn't keep the disgust she felt out of her voice "What if I already have my own plans for the mantle?"

"Come now, Keeper," the skeleton said, entirely too nonchalant about leaving off her noble title, "what could possibly compare to appeasing Crowned Death and gaining the power of the mantle for yourself?" Taleth spread his arms in a grandiose gesture. "Imagine your foes falling before you, only to rise again and swell your armies! Imagine having the power to cast the greatest spells as if they were mere cantrips! Imagine any undead you encounter submitting forever to your will! Or is it knowledge that you want? Dark and forbidden lore, lost for ages? Imagine having access to all the secrets and experience of those who died before you! All this and more shall be yours if you only perform this trifling favour for my Master!"

"Really? And here I thought you told me not a few minutes ago that he was displeased with me," Ami countered in a deadpan tone of voice. *What's in it for him?* she wondered privately. The memory of the blood-red mantle floating in the air, draped over an invisible figure wearing a flaming black crown, came to her mind.

Taleth waved a limp skeletal hand several times, as if shooing away her concerns. "Whatever your reasons for destroying the undead were, you will certainly come to your senses on your own once you realise that they will all serve you as loyally as they once served Zarekos. However," his unnatural voice became more dangerous, "In case you still - unwisely - consider passing over this offer in favour of your own so-called plans, remember that your realm might as well be one giant graveyard. Do you really wish to antagonise the Lord of the Dead even further?" His skeletal fingers made a scraping noise as they tightened around his staff.

"Are you threatening me in my own dungeon?" Ami asked, the red

slits that were her eyes narrowing.

In response, the two black metal automatons that had so far flanked the visitor quietly twitched as their goblin pilots reacted to her anger. One of them took a clanging step forward.

"I am merely making you aware that the wrath of my Lord will fall upon you if you deny his reasonable request. "

Ami's frown did not disappear from her face. "His request is impossible. As you may have noticed, there are no Light worshippers in my realm."

"A commendable state of affairs, Empress," the dark priest said, apparently assuming that she was concerned about the feasibility of the plan, rather than reluctant to go with it. "This is not an obstacle. My Lord's reach is long. Since you agree, his servants shall commence collecting the sacrifices at once."

Horrified at the thought of people being dragged screaming out of their homes by cold, dead fingers, just because her words were misinterpreted, Ami blurted out "No!"

"No?" Taleth did not sound happy.

"The mantle is mine to do with as I wish," Ami declared. "Besides, I find your offer suspiciously generous, and shall need some time to perform my own investigations before I would be willing to commit to it. If you started gathering them now, you would have to keep them alive until I was ready," she said, hoping that her explanation was plausible.

Eye sockets that didn't feel as empty as they appeared fixated on Ami, as if the death priest was trying to dissect her with his stare. "You are lying," he concluded. "The rumours of your brilliance must have been greatly exaggerated if you would choose another god over Crowned Death. So be it."

"How did you get th-"

"Then, I shall be the tool that delivers his punishment onto you!" the skeleton's voice boomed, its echoing undertones becoming more

distinct. With no more warning than a slight twist of his staff to point its end straight at the figure on the throne, he attacked.

With magically enhanced senshi reflexes, Ami transported herself out of the path of the light-devouring black ray that shot from the magical weapon, and to a chamber on the opposite end of the dungeon. She was in a golem body, but nobody familiar with Keepers would attack a possessed body in this situation if they didn't expect to inflict harm on their real target, right?

An instant later, the black, necrotic energy enveloped her throne. The imposing seat cracked and crumbled into dust, worn away by the ravages of time. Suddenly, Ami was immensely glad she had dodged. She recognised the spell as similar in nature to the rapid ageing one she used on her crops. This version was a lot more powerful, and though it probably wouldn't have harmed the ice that constituted her current body, her mind might not be protected. Would she have experienced the ageing process as if it happened in real time if that ray had struck her? How long did it take for rock to wither away like that, anyway?

While the throne collapsed into a grey cloud of gravel and dust that blossomed outward and rolled down the stairs, the reaperbots lunged for her attacker, swinging their scythes in horizontal arcs that should have cleaved the enemy into three sections. Instead, the weapons cut right through a flash of tear-shaped darkness without encountering resistance.

He can teleport! Ami realised when a black beam shot down from behind and above the metal warriors.

Floating below the ceiling of the throne room, Taleth swung his arm, sweeping the ruinous ray over the guards. The flickering dark energy drained the colour from the magically-reinforced floor tiles and washed over the metal hulks, leaving reddish masses of crumbling rust in its wake.

Since the young Keeper didn't want to find out through personal experience what getting hit with that weapon would feel like, she counter-attacked from the safety of a different room with the fastest attack she had.

A shabon spray freezing, retrieved from storage, slammed into the black-robed skeleton at point-blank range. Instantly, the ice magic encased the undead priest in a block of ice and restricted his movement. Trapped like a fly in amber, he started dropping toward the ground within his glittering prison. However, the skeleton turned transparent and remained floating where it was before the frozen shell could reach the floor and shatter.

Ami blinked in surprise and speared the spectre-like apparition with a blindingly bright lightning bolt. To her chagrin, the attack passed straight through and melted a glowing dot into her floor instead.

"Did you really think Zarekos' magical breakthroughs would disappear from the world? Death is no barrier to my Master!" Taleth taunted, diving toward the ground in a curving arc. Unexpectedly, the wraith-like apparition swerved to the side, ghosting through the broken ice shell on the ground. For the faintest moment, his form flickered back into opacity. It was just long enough for his staff to discharge towards the sole entrance of the room, where two more reaperbots had just thrown open the door wings. Instantly, they turned into a heap of scrap and rust.

He can't use magic while he's ghost-like! Ami realised. Her greatest fear at the moment was him getting out of the room and into an area with actual living employees. Searing networks of magic glowed within her transparent body as she unleashed her power against the skeleton again and again, continuously piercing his body with explosions and lightning bolts while swatting at him with her water hand. She couldn't let up and allow him the time to teleport! Reflexively, she activated her visor, which sadly didn't help at all since she was watching the robed figure remotely through Keeper sight. Still, it was necessary to be prepared just in case she was forced to fight this thing personally.

"Your efforts are useless, Keeper! I will exterminate every living being working for you," the skeleton gloated, the prongs of his staff surrounded by darkness despite the violent spellfire going off all around him. "Or perhaps I will see what this wonderful weapon does to your dungeon heart, first!" Despite his confident words, he was zigzagging wildly, trying to throw off Mercury's aim.

I need to force him to drop his spell somehow, Ami pondered. She wouldn't be able to keep this bombardment up forever, and any tiny mistake could give him the opportunity to teleport. Somehow, she found the time to retrieve a regular shabon spray from storage and filled the throne room with fog. This would at least make it harder for him to aim at underlings attracted by the noise. *Zarekos used this same spell, and the Avatar punched right through it with holy power. What do I have?*

Snyder was an option, but Ami was not willing to put the acolyte into a combat situation. The evil priest was moving fast as a snake and would certainly win in any fight between the two. Besides, she might accidentally hit him with a quick spell. Rabixtrel would be a much better choice, since he was fast enough to dodge on his own, and his cursed scythe could cut through things it really had no business cutting. Perhaps it would even work on Taleth's insubstantial form? Hmm. However, she would exhaust all her other options before she put someone who worked for her in danger.

"Ack!" Ami's eyes widened for a moment when the dark priest dodged by moving through the solid stone dais that her throne had rested on. He didn't emerge in the spot she expected, and had to correct for this with an overly large explosion that sent the braziers in the room flying. Danger narrowly averted, for the moment. This had to stop!

On the muddy ash-plains outside, Rabixtrel grunted in complete surprise when a violent tug ripped his scythe out of his hands just as he was about to strike down three ghosts perfect lined-up for the blow. Bellowing in anger, he looked around, unable to locate the missing weapon.

Even the reaper's scythe, wielded by Ami's water hand, passed through the dodging and weaving spectre just as harmlessly as all of her other attacks. She had another weapon of similar power she could try, though. Her adamantine dagger didn't have the right balance for throwing, but that didn't matter much for someone who

could simply propel it telekinetically. The bluish-gleaming weapon appeared out of nowhere, aimed at the back of Taleth's skull. Gliding toward one of the walls, the immaterial figure never knew what hit it. Mainly because the anti-evil weapon passed straight through its target.

The black-clad priest actually stopped and tilted his head to the side as he stared at the vibrating dagger that had buried itself up to the heft within the magically-reinforced wall. "Adamantine? As exotic as useless. Just imagine, this invincible protection could have been yours too," the skeleton mocked. "But no, in your unwarranted pride, you threw the opportunity away! Are you thinking about converting yet?"

Holy power! I need holy power to stop him. Keeping up this constant bombardment was tiring her out and draining her reserves. *Perhaps the Avatar's mantle could help?* The creature had offered much in order to have the silver-runed garment tainted. Ami dropped an ice golem into her treasury, close to the thick lead box that contained the artefact.

Instinctively knowing what Ami wanted from it, the icy simulacrum gathered up the mantle and draped it around its shoulders. Perhaps enough holiness would rub off on it to affect the evil being?

The teenager reached through space again, forcing herself to ignore the feeling of being on fire as she picked up the white-mantled golem. A quick twist of space, and the ice girl lunged at the ghostly form of the death priest, cloth fluttering around her like white bat wings.

Ami didn't have to wait long for a reaction. Even though the statue's fist passed through Taleth ineffectively, the mantle touched his form as she jumped through him. He let out a roaring, reverberant scream that swelled in intensity as his body burned away, dissolving into black smoke from the Light's power. His staff clattered to the ground and rolled over the floor, away from the golem landing in a crouch. It promptly embarrassed its Keeper by getting up and doing an imp-like victory jig.

Rather relieved by how well that idea had worked out, Ami ordered

the simulacrum to return the mantle to its resting place. She would rather not go through the pain of manipulating it again if she could avoid it. Now she only needed to deal with any retribution Crowned Death would send her way for destroying his priest. If more of his minions could use Zarekos' dematerialisation magic, then she was potentially in huge troub-

Abruptly, the golem screeched, drawing Ami's attention back to the battlefield. A bleached skeleton stood behind the animated statue, the three-pronged end of Taleth's staff stabbed into the mantle and through the ice creature's back.

The enemy twisted his weapon, gathering enough of the silver-runed fabric between its prongs to get a good hold on the garment. Where the bone shaft touched the holy artefact, angry red flames flared up, visible for only a brief instant before both skeleton and mantle disappeared within a raindrop-shaped blob of darkness.

The golem toppled, already dead even before the dark priest took along its back half with his teleportation.

"Darn it!" Shocked, Ami stared at the empty spot that had only an instant ago contained both dark priest and mantle. The copy of his staff still on the ground quietly faded away. Wet, bony footprints led away from the debris of the ice block she had trapped him in earlier, and she found his empty, skull-adorned robe among the debris.

Illusions and invisibility! He had tricked her! The transparent image of the priest had been nothing but an illusion to distract her! No wonder nothing could affect it! If Ami currently had lungs, she would have started hyperventilating. "Darn it, darn it, darn it!" On the verge of panic, she summoned a crystal ball, almost dropping it in her haste. She had to get that mantle back! The scrying device erupted with light from the amount of power she poured into it as she searched for the thief.

Taleth had teleported to some place in the Underworld; there was no way that the green shafts of light falling in from cracks in the black sky could be natural. Clad once more in a hooded vestment, the dark priest rapidly ascended a narrow set of steep stairs. The Avatar's mantle hung from his burning staff like a banner. Pairs of

obelisks framed his path, jutting into the air like petrified ribs. At the top of the structure, which reminded Ami of Aztec pyramids, shimmered a round basin full of strange, swirling waters.

Ami's despair grew as she recognised its hypnotic, ever-changing patterns. This was a dark temple, no matter how unconventionally-shaped. She would have expected a temple to a death god to be filled to the brim with bones, or at least partly carved from them. However, the only skulls that glinted wetly in the poisonous light were large sculptures carved into the building's obsidian flanks. Perhaps Crowned Death was loathe to waste raw material for more minions?

Taleth arrived on top of the ziggurat and stopped right in front of the unholy basin. He slowly turned his head until he was looking over his right shoulder, and met Mercury's remote gaze with his empty eye sockets. A flick of his wrist, and the Avatar's mantle slipped off his crumbling, burnt staff and fell, tumbling like a leaf in the wind.

Ami gasped as the garment hung in the air for a timeless moment, unable to stop the inevitable. She didn't even know where that temple was located. The mantle touched the liquid and sank into it; the runes embroidered into its seams flaring up. For a moment, it looked as if a shooting star was falling into the liquid, and then the last of its light was gone. Aghast, Ami continued staring at the unholy temple until the undead priest waved his staff, causing her crystal ball to go dark. "No..." She protested, unwilling to accept what had just happened. How was she going to explain this to her allies?

Last edited: Sep 28, 2016

Formulating a Response

Originally on 2011-02-20T20:53:00

Stupid! How could I have been so stupid? Ami needed to run damage control, but how? She had better consult with the others. She almost teleported to the command centre, but changed her mind at the last moment. This wasn't something she wanted to discuss in front of just anyone. Instead, she transported herself to the living room, appearing a few centimetres above the ground in her haste. She stumbled when her feet hit the carpet with a muffled thud, and a shattering noise came from her hands. Surprised, she looked at her fists. She had actually clenched them hard enough to break the ice fingers within the black gloves. She really needed to calm down.

In the blink of an eye, a shadow-like column materialised to the golem's left, turning into the blue-haired Keeper when colour flowed back into her. Ami took a deep, calming breath, something that would have had no effect had she still been possessing the regenerating statue, and sought out her advisers.

A group of creatures, the majority of them trolls, lounged on the floor in front of the closed door leading to Jered's temporary office. The section of hallway they had turned into a temporary waiting room was suffering from their presence, since contact with their unwashed backs left dirty stains on the brightly-coloured walls. To pass time, the bored creatures waiting for their turn to be called in were playing marbles.

One of the troll players flinched when an angry female screech from behind the door startled him, causing his green finger to hit the marble at the wrong angle and miss its target. He grunted in anger as he lost his lead. He had just scored big the round before by bouncing one of the polished spheres into his opponent's eye, too!

Within the office, Cathy stood beside Jered behind a tall, black desk,

pinching his right ear between her fingers. She shot a glare at the drying ink on the pages before him, then at the leather-clad floozy posturing in front of the desk. "...why are you even writing this down?" she asked her boyfriend, who was currently clad in a suit of elbow-to-the-ribs-proof armour.

The wavy-haired man shot a chagrined look to the back corner of the room, where the imp in charge of calling in the next visitors hopped up and down, snickering at his misfortune. "Well, it is my job to note down the applicants' special talents."

"Oh, yes. The Empress is going to jump for joy when she reads this list and finds 'exhaustive repertoire of courtesan skills' on it," the blonde said sarcastically.

"I can always hope," the wavy-haired man answered unwisely. "Ow!"

"Excuse me," the dark mistress watching the assault on Jered's earlobe said, raising a finger covered in shiny black leather as she tried to catch the swordswoman's attention. "If I may, I could demonstrate much more effective ways of inflicting pain than-"

"You shut up!" Cathy interrupted. Before Jered could give his own opinion, both of them disappeared into thin air, leaving the other woman to blink bemusedly at the spot the two had just vacated.

"But Snyder, we really should get to know each other better," the pale-skinned dark elf leaning over the redhead's workbench said in a sing-song voice, almost thrusting her cleavage in his face.

Cornered, the acolyte pressed his back into the bookshelf behind him, wishing the obstacle would disappear. "But, um, I feel flattered, Venna, really, but, well, um..." the acolyte stuttered, his eyes glued to her chest despite his best efforts.

Her current attire, a strapless dress of purplish cloth, managed to stay in place only by virtue of its tightness. It was a huge step up in modesty from the barely-there belts of leather she had worn while still suffering from Keeper Morrigan's mental conditioning. It also

remained skimpy enough to make the young man uncomfortable. The fact that she had apparently mugged a warlock for his robes and fashioned them into her tiny outfit was a warning sign, though.

Snyder wondered how he'd get out of this situation. He felt like a mouse in front of a hungry cat as Venna licked her lips. It wasn't that he found the curvaceous woman unattractive, quite the contrary. Since her mind was no longer messed up, it wouldn't even be morally wrong to indulge a little. He was actually surprised she still seemed interested in him, but why wouldn't she be? He was, after all, good-looking, competent, cultured, and had Mercury's favour. However, he just didn't know how to deal with that much aggressiveness. He also doubted he could hide the fact that he remained a Light worshipper from her if the two of them got that close. But mostly, the dark elf's friend Eline standing silently in the door frame, juggling two curved daggers and shooting him death glares, kind of killed the mood.

"...it just wouldn't work," he finished lamely, quite aware that by now, she had probably forgotten the beginning of his sentence already. *Really smooth there*, he mentally reprimanded himself. He hoped she would handle the rejection well. Maybe he should see if he could manage to draw a repulsion ward behind his back?

Venna lowered her head.

For a moment Snyder felt pity for her. An instant later, he realised with a start that she was merely tensing her muscles in preparation for vaulting over his workbench. *"Light, I could really use some help here! Please?"* he prayed.

Venna pounced, then let out a very frustrated huff as the young man disappeared from underneath her while she was tackling him to the ground.

Ami's hand went up to her mouth in surprise when Jered and Cathy appeared before her. Even through the transport, the swordswoman had maintained her grip on her boyfriend's ear. Fortunately for the weasel-featured man, she had the presence of mind to let go before

he succumbed to gravity, his rear no longer supported by a chair.

The clanging noise of Jered's armour hitting the ground almost masked the simultaneous appearance of Jadeite and Snyder next to each other. Ami's eyes went wide when a pinkish light detonated between the two.

"What do you think you are doing?" the curly-haired blonde growled at the prone acolyte, staggering back a step. He shot an icy look at the redhead from underneath his protectively-raised right forearm.

"Huh, wha-" Confused by his changed surroundings, Snyder blinked, his extended left arm tingling from the discharged repulsion ward. He paled slightly when he noticed that it was pointed straight at Mercury's most powerful sorcerer. "It was an accident! I did not intend to-"

"Ow, that was abrupt," Jered whined, taking Cathy's hand to pull himself to his feet.

"Enough, everyone!" Ami shouted, only to cough shyly when all eyes turned on her. "Sorry about summoning you so brusquely, but we have an emergency!"

"Who's attacking?" Cathy asked, all business as she focused her full attention on the blue-haired girl.

Likewise, the others fell quiet as they watched the teenager, who was wringing her hands as an outward sign of her nervousness. Only the black-fukued ice golem standing to her side seemed amused at the recent chaos and bounced from one foot to the other, making her short blue skirt sway around her hips.

Deciding that anything but the most direct approach would waste valuable time, Ami concentrated on the essentials. "The envoy from Crowned Death managed to steal the Avatar's mantle from me and get away."

"What?" Snyder's exclamation was high-pitched, filled with horror. "You have to get it back!"

"Damn! You aren't even kidding," Cathy shouted. "How'd that

bastard manage that?"

"I'd like to know that too," Jadeite said in a calmer tone of voice. Of course, he had no emotional attachment to the thing, and only the slight downward curve of his lips showed his displeasure.

"He made unacceptable demands and then attacked me when it became clear that I would not fulfil them," Ami reported. "I immediately escaped from the room and struck back, and since he showed he could teleport, I-"

"Hold on! Teleport?" Cathy interrupted. "Can he potentially get back here and cause havoc, and is he personally dangerous?"

"Yes to both," Ami said, sounding wary.

"Everyone on high alert, follow the procedures we had established during the war against Nero. The threat is a well-armed teleporter, rather than remote spell bombardment this time," Cathy broadcast telepathically. A flicker of green light played around her left eyeball from the communication spell, one of the few magical tricks she had bothered to learn. *"Eline, Tserk, Brugli, gather the new recruits and tell them what that means!"* She turned back to Ami."I hope you approve?"

The young Keeper nodded. "Yes. I assume he already has what he came from, but it's better to err on the side of caution."

"The Avatar's mantle," Snyder urged, "how did you lose it again?"

"I encased Taleth - that's what that skeleton priest called himself - in a block of ice, but he used an illusion to make me think he escaped using Zarekos' dematerialisation technique, and that he couldn't use magic while immaterial." Ami closed her eyes, looking pained. "Since I'm so used to automatically seeing through that kind of effect with my visor, I didn't even consider the possibility that he might be trying to trick me." She sighed. "I was too busy slinging spell after spell at him so he had no time to teleport that I couldn't properly think things through. Since Zarekos was vulnerable to holy power, I deployed a golem with the mantle against the priest. He faked his death, then sneaked up on the golem while invisible, seized the

mantle, and teleported out."

"Did you track him?" Jered asked immediately. "Maybe you can still take it back!"

Through the distant rock, they could hear the muffled footsteps of creatures running through the hallways as Cathy's instructions sank in.

"I did," Ami said, looking down. "He let me watch as he threw it into the pool of a dark temple. I'm at a loss at how to get it out from there."

"Do you know what he needs it for?" Jadeite asked pragmatically. "I mean, yes, this is an annoyance, but it isn't as if you *need* the thing. However, you should still punish this impertinence."

"We cannot let a dark god keep the Avatar's mantle!" Snyder shot back immediately, glowering at the grey-uniformed general.

"Oh, and how do you propose we get it back, acolyte?" the curly-haired blonde snapped. "It's not as if we can just fish it back out!"

"It comes worse," Ami interrupted, her clear voice cutting through the argument. "They are going to kill thousands of people to desecrate the mantle again." She clenched her fists "We have to stop them, or at least get the mantle back. I don't want to be responsible for so many deaths just because I made such a blunder!"

"You can't hold yourself responsible for the evil that others do!" Cathy objected immediately. "What the followers of the dark gods do is all on their own conscience. Still, I agree that we need to do something."

"Agreed. We cannot let this attack and theft go unpunished," Jadeite said, crossing his arms. "Useful or not, letting the artefact slip through our fingers like that would make us look weak."

"Wait, if they want to desecrate it, they need to remove it from the basin at some point," Jered pointed out, slamming his fist into his palm. "We could probably get a lead on where they will be

conducting the dark ritual if we tracked the sacrifices. I doubt they can gather that many without drawing attention to their activities. Someone would definitely notice this."

"And once we know where it is happening, we can show up and stop them," Ami said with a grim smile. "Jered, your talents are most suited for this. Use as many of your spies and Underworld contacts as necessary. You have, hmm," Ami frowned in concentration as she thought, "five times the usual budget for bribes and expenses as usual before it starts cutting into other projects."

The wavy-haired man nodded. "I'll get right on it. I'll also see what information I can find on Crowned Death and his goons while I'm at it!" He saluted sloppily and waited for Mercury to transport him to his office, which she did with a grateful smile.

Ami turned to Jadeite. "We might have to assault a dark temple. Since the enemy troops will be dangerous enough without their god being able to interfere directly, I need you and the youma to come up with ways to inflict disruptive damage on such a structure. Keep in mind that there will be innocent hostages who must not be harmed, though!"

"I won't disappoint you, Empress," Jadeite said with a confident smirk and bowed, holding his right arm across his chest. With a shimmer of violet lines, he disappeared.

"Cathy, Snyder. Do you have any suggestions?" Ami asked the two advisers remaining with her in the room.

"You should ask the Avatar for assistance," the red-and-white-clad acolyte said after a moment of reflection. "He cannot be happy with his mantle being back in enemy hands."

Technically, my hands are enemy hands too from his point of view, Ami thought sadly. "All right, any help would be welcome. I'm not looking forward to telling him that I lost the mantle, though."

Snyder smiled and inclined his head silently. "I am sure he will understand."

Cathy took a step forward. "You should also keep the larger strategical situation in mind. This location must remain secure while you act." The blonde spread her arms and turned in a circle, as if trying to encompass the entire Avatar Islands with her gesture. "You could win the battle and lose the war if your dungeon heart here is targeted while you have your forces deployed elsewhere. Besides, we'll almost certainly have to deal with retaliation from the death priests and their allies after our attack."

"Right. I wouldn't want a repeat of what happened with Azzathra, only with an entire batch of Crowned Death-worshipping Keepers out for my blood this time." The red glow in her eyes increased to new heights. "That means stopping the ceremony is only the first step. We'll have to do lasting, crippling damage to his cult, if possible. But I can't plan an entire campaign with as little information as I have available right now."

"Err, I was thinking more about shoring up the defences here," Cathy said, somewhat taken aback by the sudden enthusiasm in the blue-haired girl's voice.

"Yes, that would necessarily be part of it," Ami said, her thoughts preoccupied more with coming up with a plan of action. "I'll have more alarm wards spread all over the claimed territory. With the aid of the youma to deal with water barriers, the vampires will be able to jump any dungeon that pops up and deal with it before it becomes a large problem. Provided it is detected early enough, and that the vampires remain loyal against an opponent like Crowned Death, of course."

"I'll make sure that's handled correctly," Cathy offered. "I'll pay special attention to sending some teams to the area where you lost a dungeon heart."

That place remained an annoying thorn in Ami's side, but so far, she had no idea how to reclaim it without being sucked into the dark gods' realm. "Please do. Also, I need you to organise the new recruits and assign them jobs. Prioritise manufacturing over combat training. Reaperbots are easier to replace than recruits."

"Will do," the blonde confirmed.

"Snyder, look up ways to fight the undead and wards against necromancy, please. Pick some of the new warlocks and form a research team, if you think that will help. I'll speak with Torian and the others and find out what they know about the enemy."

At first glance, Torian's workroom resembled a comfortable reading room, complete with a high-backed armchair in front of a blazing fireplace that flooded the place with warm light. A closer look at the titles of the books filling the shelves, or at the warning labels adorning the bottles within a wooden cabinet, revealed that the chamber's usual tenant was no kindly grandfather.

The head warlock had respectfully ceded his armchair to Ami and was now sitting across the table from her, looking very pleased at being able to answer her questions. The rest of his team stood behind him, forming a backdrop of garish purple robes and beards of various lengths.

"I need to know of whom I would make enemies if I struck at the priesthood of Crowned Death," Ami asked. The smell in the room, a strange mix of musty paper, firewood, and acid fumes, made her nose itch.

"Of course, your Imperial Highness. The dark god himself would object to such activities, obviously, and so would your . I am unaware of how many Keepers worship that particular deity, but most of the intelligent undead do. This might include your vampires," the short-bearded man said with disdain. "You may want to get rid of them."

Some of the other warlocks crowding around him nodded in agreement, attempting to contribute.

"The rest of the Underworld wouldn't make a fuss if you moved against him, though I cannot see any immediate benefit in doing so. Not that I'm questioning you, your Highness," he added quickly. "Crowned Death is unpopular among the living, since he would love to see everyone dead."

Ami perked up at that. "Go on. Could we find allies willing to move against him?"

Torian's shoulders sagged, and his perpetual smile waned. "Ah, my Empress, you must understand that nobody likes fighting him," the warlock said. "Any soldiers lost rise against you. He grants his followers the power to ignore the normal limits of necromancy, so his most feared ability is raising undead monsters from corpses, rather than transforming one of the living into a new minion."

"Undead from corpses?" If they weren't more dangerous than the regular skeletons and ghosts, then she could handle them. Suddenly, she paled. "I need guards around the dragon corpse, now!" At the same time, she was already scanning the area of the iceberg that contained the huge, well-preserved carcass, and started dropping reaperbots into position.

"Your Majesty?" Torian asked, looking puzzled as he stroked his oiled beard.

"At least one of his priests is a hostile magic user who can teleport," Ami explained, "I need you warlocks to detach the dragon's limbs, head, and tail from the body so it cannot possibly be used against us!" She narrowed her eyes at the group when she heard a few unhappy mutters. "I don't care how many potential reagents will be lost that way! Torian, you are responsible for seeing this through! Be aware that this enemy is fond of using illusions and invisibility. Use smoke and fog to counter this if you have no better option."

The short-bearded man's eyes widened as the task was thrust upon him, and he flinched back as if hit. "A- as you wish, my esteemed Empress. There should be a few suitable detection spells in the grimoires. I also humbly request the assistance of at least thirty imps for this task."

"Granted," Ami agreed immediately. Her little workers were idle most of the time anyway. "Before you go, do you know the range and scale of Crowned Death's undead-raising abilities?"

"I do," an older warlock with hollow cheeks said. "Unless one of his followers appears in person, he will not be able to make use of the dead bodies in the ground," the grey-haired magic user said. "It would be rather inconvenient for us if one of the Keepers worshipping him could establish a foothold here, though. Any dead

on his claimed land would be his to command."

"Then I'll work on preventing just that," Ami said. "Your information has been helpful, thank you. Now please get to your assigned tasks. Dismissed."

Ami sat in front of her desk, her computer out and her visor active as she reshuffled her priorities and catalogued the different problems at hand, trying to come up with a proper schedule.

Her research into adamantine would, sadly, have to be delayed until the current crisis was dealt with. Finding a dwarf who knew how to work with it could be delegated to someone else, however, so the time would not be totally lost. She also needed to fix her throne room, or, even better, prepare a special room just for receiving visitors outside of the main dungeon - stuffed full of as many anti-magical wards as she could. Not exactly high priority right now.

The rest of the Avatar Islands needed to be better protected against Keepers setting up shop, too. She could fortify her claim on the land with additional dungeon hearts, but then she'd have to defend these too. Still, she had been planning on making new ones anyway, since her current model didn't allow her to control the corruption it produced to nearly the degree she desired. *Yes, I guess I'll be able to try out my new design earlier than I thought.*

Briefly, Ami considered the possibility of using the corruption as a weapon, guiding it - she'd need to figure out how to do so - through a portal and into one of Crowned Death's temples. *Wouldn't work, that would be rather like trying to drown a fish,* she decided. Discovering how the scrying-blocking properties of Zarekos' temple worked would be a better use of her time. She appended that task to her list with a few deft keystrokes.

Now, what could she actually deploy against the undead? She could ask her friends for more chemistry books. Her dungeon heart was a chemist's dream made true. Given sufficient motivation, she could use it to cook up some truly horrible concoctions. The question was, would she be able to keep her weapons from falling into enemy

hands? If she was only facing another Keeper, she would feel confident that sufficiently volatile compounds couldn't be recovered and analysed. Unfortunately, she couldn't be sure that the same would be true in a temple to the dark gods. In any case, it probably wouldn't hurt if she studied some formulas. She didn't have to actually use them, but it would be good to have the option. Yes, she'd contact her friends later, she decided. For now, she would do some intelligence-gathering of her own.

With a blue flash, the black-clad girl appeared in her ruined throne room, hovering above the debris-strewn floor. The puddles of muddy, rust-coloured melt water around the ice shards gleamed in the light of the toppled braziers as she floated closer to her destination. She gestured with her right hand, and the soggy black fabric of Taleth's discarded cloak rose from the ground.

The young Keeper telekinetically spread out the garment, inspecting it in silence as water dripped down from it. Judging from the large tear in its centre, the skeleton had found it more expedient to slip out of his robe than to try and rip it from the ice encasing it. After a few minutes of scanning, a mirthless smile that didn't reach her eyes appeared on Ami's face. When she had frozen the flying dark priest solid, the impact of his prison with the floor had not left the skeleton unscarred. Dear Taleth had left little bone splinters behind.

With meticulous care, Ami started collecting the tiny pieces. She inspected each one with her visor to make sure it really belonged to the undead priest, and not to one of the animal skulls decorating his outfit. After several minutes of concentrated work, she had almost a thimble full of bleached, powdery bone bits. She allowed herself an evil grin. Zarekos had used a vial of her blood to track her. Bone was as much part of the body as blood, and she knew which spell the vampire lord had used.

Sneaking Around

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Ami gently closed her fingers around the warm body of the grey bat sitting on her left palm, restraining the soft-furred animal. Its wings twitched weakly in her grip as she used tweezers with her other hand to remove a tiny golden tiara from the nervous animal's forehead. Next, she picked up a pair of scissors small as nail clippers and started cutting open the mockery of a black leotard covering the bat's body. Her senshi transformation had not been kind to the animal. A moment later, the armour-like black fabric joined the tiny blue skirt she had already freed the small animal from on the ground. Silently, she turned the bat around and admired her handiwork. Aside from the minuscule blue earrings, nothing created by her transformation sequence remained on its body. The jewellery had to stay, since it was needed to activate her visor.

"Jadeite, you know what to do?" she asked over her shoulder, where the dark general was watching her handle the animal with an amused smile.

"Of course," he said, inclining his head for a short nod. "That dark priest Taleth is in an area of the Underworld somewhere around here." He stabbed a white-gloved finger down at the map on the table before him. It landed on the blue-painted bit of the canvas denoting the ocean to the east of the Avatar Islands. "I can open a portal there without difficulty, but I can't guarantee that it will get you close to the target."

"That's fine, I'm rather hoping it won't," Ami said with a smile of her own. "I wouldn't want to enter the temple proper anyway. Taking scans from outside will have to suffice."

"Are you sure that personally going on a scouting mission is a wise use of your time?"

Ami nodded. "Yes. Even though the enemy might not be conducting the ceremony at that particular temple, I still need reliable scans of

its interior. Even if scrying worked around that place, it wouldn't give me enough data to analyse the energy flows and defences within. I'll at least find out what to expect from similar structures," she stated. "Besides, I can remotely manage the dungeon from any location." She petted the bat with one finger to calm it down and took a step closer to the curly-haired blonde. "Are you ready, then?"

"We can start as soon as you wish," the grey-uniformed general replied.

In response, Ami gently threw the bat into the air. As soon as the animal spread its wings, the blue-headed girl turned into black lightning that was absorbed into the flying creature's body. From her new perspective, Jadeite looked like a giant. Nevertheless, she fluttered straight at him and landed on his palm, making herself comfortable on the soft glove. With a one-winged wave at the huge, bemused face looking down at her, she signalled that she was ready.

Jadeite teleported, taking Ami along. In an instant, the marble-like interior of the chamber was replaced by a clouded sky over the vast, open sea.

There were no landmarks anywhere in sight, but Ami could sense how far away she was from either of her two dungeon hearts and triangulate her position that way. They were in the right spot, and the magic that made Taleth's location stand out like a beacon in her mind confirmed her calculations, too.

"Go ahead?" Jadeite asked.

The tiny bat on his hand nodded, prompting him to thrust his right hand forward and rip a black, circular portal into space.

Slightly reluctant to leave her warm, comfy spot, Ami hopped off his fingers as if they were a springboard, circled him once, and hurled herself into the black ellipse.

An imp whistled through the air like a cannonball, its passing barely

audible over the thundering explosion behind it. The magical servant's cheeks fluttered from the air resistance, distorting its expression into a skull-like grimace.

The shockwave sweeping the unfortunate creature along accelerated as it was focused by the tapering tunnel. For an instant, the bend at its end reflected in the shiny black eyes of the imp before it slammed into the masonry and dissipated into a shower of green motes, leaving cracks at its impact point. The dungeon continued shaking and vibrating for a few seconds longer, and then silence settled over the place, broken only by the sounds of tiny pieces of debris raining to the ground.

"Monteraine! You had better have a good explanation for this!" a male voice almost as loud as the previous explosion and quite a bit more menacing, echoed through the cavern.

Choking coughs came from the interior of the huge black cloud of smoke that filled the vast chamber, and a slender, vaguely female silhouette staggered out of it. "I'm - cough - still alive, Master!" The long-haired and soot-covered woman coughed a few more times into the smouldering fabric of her sleeve. For one of Morrigan's minions, the female warlock was dressed remarkably modestly, even if her robes barely reached to mid-thigh and revealed long, scratched legs.

The massive Keeper, clad only in a loose loincloth, appeared at the entrance to the cavern and stared down at his minion.

Accompanied by a loud smacking noise, the bruised woman flew backward, rolling back into the smoke.

"I can see that, you moron! You promised me you would make it work this time!"

One of the two leather-clad mistresses draped lasciviously around Morrigan smirked at the sight and caressed his bare pectorals, obvious delight playing around her lips.

"I- that is," Monteraine stammered, clenching her teeth as she pulled herself to her feet. Behind her, a burst metal pipe loomed into the air

like a grasping polyp, releasing more sulphurous smoke into the air. "I was sure we had it right this time," she managed to choke out between pained groans. "I copied the setup exactly, and even if the symbolism is still beyond-"

"Shut up! I have no patience for your excuses! I don't enjoy wasting valuable mana on failures like this, either. The costs will come out of your pay," Morrigan continued.

"Y-yes, Master," the female magician said, her head bowed. "If you allow me, I'll go get my wounds treated and discuss the problem with the rest of the staff to see what went wrong this time," she blurted out with great haste, not daring to look at the Keeper. "I'm sure we duplicated the pattern of pipes and regulators perfectly this time, so there has to be some component of the mana-guiding apparatus we are missing. If I could only have a closer look at those wires..." She clapped her hands together, hiding the pain that simple motion was causing her. "In any case, I'm sure that we'll figure out how Mercury can extract magical power from magma soon. There are only so many valid runic configurations that-"

"No." Morrigan's answer echoed through the smoke-filled cave like a death sentence.

"M-Master?" Monteraine asked, suppressing a shiver. Was he going to kill her for this failure, or worse, turn her into one of his compliant little dolls? She tensed, unwilling to go out without a fight, no matter how one-sided it would be.

"You will not be getting a rest. Since you are just too stupid to figure out what that bitch of an empress is doing by looking at the end result, you'll just have to figure out how she puts them together. You are in luck, she's building something right now." The Keeper's bald head gleamed from the oil covering his skin as he smirked at her, narrowing his red-glowing eyes. "Do not fail me again!"

With a nauseating twist of space, the researcher found herself flung into a dimly lit chamber, landing almost upside down. The coarse orange carpet absorbed some of the impact, but she still bruised her already hurting shoulders. Curse Morrigan and his impatient, childish punishments. Still dazed, she became aware of nasty

snickers around her. What? Oh, of course. The hem of her robe had succumbed to gravity and slid down up all the way to her navel, exposing her underwear and backside.

Quickly, the mage flipped onto her belly and pulled herself to her feet. With two quick motions, she smoothed out her tattered clothing and glared into the round, as if daring anyone to say a word. Several sets of teeth gleamed back at her from the twilight, bared as their owners grinned. They clearly hadn't missed the way she had arrived, and had correctly concluded that her standing with Morrigan was quite precarious right now. *Like sharks smelling blood in the water,* she thought.

One of the warlocks answered her challenging look. "Why, Monteraine, have your many failures finally riled the Master-" That was as far as he got, because at that point, the tip of his tongue turned to stone.

Monteraine snipped her fingers, extinguishing the purple glow around them. She had been aiming for the eyes, but was quite satisfied with the results. "Does anyone else want to voice an opinion? No? Good. I'm still the head warlock here, and until our Keeper sees it fit to change that, you'll do what I tell you! Now get me a crystal ball and some wound salve over here!"

As the underlings moved to follow her orders, Monteraine let herself drop onto a large pillow with a sigh of contentment. She had better start working on what Morrigan wanted, or her situation could become even more untenable. Any moment she wasted right now could make her miss the one important facet of Empress Mercury's work that would make every other piece of the puzzle fall into place. It wasn't just the fear of her Keeper that drove her on, but also curiosity. This was another chance to decipher the mysterious empress' secrets, and she wasn't going to let it slip through her fingers! "Calibrate the crystal ball for that new excavation she is doing," she ordered in a deceptively relaxed tone of voice.

With no further ado, the glowing orb was set down in front of her, affixed to a block of marble covered in iron runes.

The warlock adjusted her position until she was sitting sideways on

the pillow to go easy on the tender muscles in her legs, and leaned forward. What she saw was quite interesting.

Rock crumbled into debris as a hordes of dust-caked imps worked the stone, swinging their picks down hard enough that their feet left the ground. Monteraine idly took note that these were more of Keeper Mercury's special imps - vaguely female, and wearing strange overalls and helmets. If they merited additional protective garb over regular imps, then they had to be more valuable. Not that the scrying warlock could see them doing anything unusual while she tried to make out every detail she could through the wafting dust.

Puffs of colourful smoke came from the walls and floor where the workers fortified it. Monteraine discovered the typical metallic filaments that the enemy Keeper incorporated almost everywhere underneath the wall cladding. "You! Copy those designs as accurately as you can before they get covered up!" she bellowed at two of the other warlocks.

The arcane significance of the wire patterns still escaped her, but it had to be there. She already knew that they seemed to have some affinity for lightning-aspected mana. Perhaps some kind of ward? It didn't resemble any she had seen, though. According to known theory, nothing that haphazardly-looking should be functional. Perhaps the fact that the wires moved around corners was significant? Any arcane symbols she knew about were limited to flat surfaces. If Keeper Mercury had learned how to design new ones that extended into the third dimension, then she had to be a genius of the highest calibre. The possibilities this opened were really exciting!

Now, what were those imps doing, emptying out sack of brownish-red stones into the new cavern? Some sort of reagent, or just raw materials to drive down the price of whatever the enemy Keeper was about to construct? "Blott, identify that mineral for me!"

"At a glance, looks like iron ore to me," one of the shadowed figures replied.

"Make sure it really is," Monteraine barked. "Now what is Mercury up

to?" She watched in fascination as some of the piles of stones melted away to form rows upon rows of steel tubs. Wiring from the walls snaked forward like vines to connect with them. She bit back a curse when she noticed that many of the constructs were filled with blocks of a whitish, ice-like substance that disgorged a thick, grey mist. Visibility in the room was dropping rapidly, even as the complexity of Mercury's construction work increased. The warlock did what she could, flicking from one perspective to the next to get good close-ups of the internal structures, but the fog was making things difficult.

The tubs grew higher, interconnecting with glass tubes and sprouting strange clusters of crystals and vials. The glass knots filled with bubbling liquid of various colours were rather fascinating. Oh, and there were runes forming, too.

I know those, the injured warlock realised as the individual symbols inscribed themselves into the metal. *Some kind of alarm ward. And those over there will be scrying detectors when finished. I wonder what that array over there connecting to the lightning-wires does.* She was staring intently into her crystal ball when she found out. The moment the spy-detecting wards finished, they lit up. Not with the soft, whitish glow she was expecting, but with a harsh glare bright as the sun, fuelled by the activating array. She flinched away from the suddenly-radiant crystal ball, shielding her face with her sleeves.

Muttered expletives echoed through the room as the sudden brightness startled her assistants. Needless to say, with the fog veiling the little that Monteraine could still see as she squinted against the blinding light, further observation became pointless. She could vaguely make out long rows of identical shapes throwing shadows onto the glowing fog, but not more. What in the world did the dark empress want with that many alchemical apparatuses?

Ami found the sensation of cold air flowing around her wings rather exhilarating as she fluttered around in a bat body. Flapping the membrane-covered appendages in regular intervals was almost like swimming through the air, and the experience was enjoyable in a

similar way. Whoops! She let out a startled squeak too high-pitched for human hearing as she clumsily dodged a low-hanging stalactite, clearing it by scant centimetres. *I need more practice with this form,* she mused as she loosened her control of the body a bit, letting the animal's instincts guide her movements more. She shifted her huge ears, marvelling at the precision with which her tiny body corrected for the change in air resistance, and produced ultrasonic noises through the structures in her nose.

The echoes reflected back at her from the cavern walls formed a picture of her environment in her mind, almost as accurate sight. Being able to sense her surroundings from the echoes alone felt odd, particularly since she couldn't even perceive how she was doing it. It was simply happening naturally somewhere in the brain, without her doing anything. Nevertheless, the ability was supremely useful in this dark cavernous environment, and so was her current form. *Being a bat here is a perfect disguise*, she pondered and concentrated on the faint pull in her mind that told her in which direction she needed to go to find Taleth, and how far he was away. Another branch in the tunnels ahead. She had better go right if she wanted to get closer to him.

Ami swerved into the jagged fissure that crossed the main cavern here, keeping close to the ceiling of the skewed crevasse. She was a bat right now, yes, but she still preferred to stay out of sight. With a temple of Crowned Death in the vicinity, bats might be given more scrutiny than usual, on the off chance of them being transformed vampires. The young Keeper didn't want the red light in her tiny eyes to give her away in that situation. While this part of the Underworld seemed deserted so far, she remained cautious. The enemy priest was less than a kilometre ahead, and her sensitive ears were now picking up signs of life - or at least movement - at the end of the tunnel.

In compliance with Cathy's telepathic orders, a group of Ami's new recruits had congregated at one of the designated safe points. They were rather happy to see that it was the dungeon's dining room. Three of the Keeper's warlocks were marching up and down along the rows of unevenly-sized tables, their gem-tipped staves glowing

faintly with crackling arcs of magic. If a teleporting intruder showed up here, he would have to deal with the wary mages' shields and readied spells.

Secure in the knowledge that they were well protected, the five orcs, two trolls, and three giant salamanders had little qualms about seizing chairs and footstools as appropriate for their size and shape, and taking a seat at one of the free tables. Soon enough, they were gorging themselves on the food and drink carried in by the imps.

"Thish chicken tashtesh rasher burnt," one of the orcs said with his mouth full.

Kner wouldn't know, since he hadn't touched the food yet. Instead, the pink-skinned orc was intently watching his companion chew and swallow. Only when the latter didn't choke or keel over, he filled his bowl from the same pot as the speaker. Paranoid? Perhaps, but why take unnecessary risks?

"I blame the goblinsss," one of the lizards hissed, showing his forked tongue. "I hear the chef iss a particularly fat and nasssty one!"

"Goblins. No wonder they can't even get chicken right!" the female of the two trolls sitting at the same table agreed, her voice haughty. "You'd think an Empress would have a proper chef!"

Kner shot her an odd look, since he remembered seeing the leathery-skinned creature devour a chicken raw only a few days ago, without even bothering to pluck it first. Suffice it to say, he was rather sceptical about her being able to appreciate good food. Not that the complaints about the rather crunchy meat were entirely unjustified.

"Hey! We not got chicken room before Empress stomp Nero!" one of the pointy-eared goblins seated at a different table protested. Evidence enough for Kner that their every word *was* being monitored. "Brugli just not have enough time to practice yet!"

"No chickensss?" one of the salamanders asked, its fiery orange scales glinting as it turned its head to look over at the goblin. "What did you eat before?" it asked, sounding as if it was dreading the

answer.

"Fish and baked stuff, from farms," the goblin replied. "Also had spiders once. Were yummy." The tiny greenskin rubbed his belly.

"Empress Mercury may be powerful, but she's clearly has skewed priorities," the haughty troll jumped on the opportunity to badmouth her new boss.

Kner was actively starting to look for a different table to sit at now. He'd rather not be associated with that rather dim-witted creature. How unfortunate, he rather liked this nice, secure seat in an inaccessible corner. Maybe he could make some profit from this situation by tattling on her? What was her name again? Uzig? Uzil. Yes, that sounded right.

"Watch what you are saying," one of the patrolling warlocks passing the table said, stopping to glare at the loudmouthed troll. "Our Empress simply didn't see the need to waste her brilliance on mere poultry!"

"Not being able to get a hatchery up on her own is a sign of brilliance now?" the troll shot back.

"It is when you are busy coming up with a way to *blackmail the Light gods themselves* instead," the warlock answered smugly. "Successfully, I might add."

The troll - Uzil - had no answer to that and huffed, chewing her crunchy chicken in silence. Unfortunately, as far as Kner was concerned, that state didn't last very long.

"Well, I'm not impressed so far," Uzil commented. "I might not stick around for much longer than the next payday if things continue like that." Her massive brows furrowed as she noticed the empty pot on the table. "You bastards," she complained, gesturing at the empty plate before her, "you should have left something for me!"

"Should have talked less and eaten more," the orc sitting opposed from her grunted, finding Kner's silent approval.

"Where in darkness' name are those lazy imps? I want a refill!" the

troll continued, undaunted by the glares she was receiving. She stood up from the seat so she could oversee the hall better and shouted "Hey! Service!" into the room, ignoring the glares in her direction.

The lone imp hurrying about, balancing a stack of plates, continued to ignore her.

"Hey! I'm talking to you," Uzil shouted, and tossed her empty plate at the back of the tiny creature's head.

The piece of earthen tableware accurately whistled through the air and shattered upon impact with the imp's helmet. Predictably, the startled worker lost her balance and toppled forward, sending an avalanche of dirty dishes over the tables in front of her. The creatures sitting in the way of the cascade of splintering gashes shouted in surprise, winced as they were struck by plates and pieces, and tried to jump out of their path. Chairs toppled, beer spilled, and monsters went sprawling, their shouts mixing with the noise of shards trickling to the floor.

Those uninvolved laughed uproariously and pointed at the victims, compounding the chaos. Someone kicked the innocent imp as she tried to get out unnoticed, and she disappeared between some table legs with a yelp.

Three orcs covered in light cuts slowly got up and moved in Uzil's direction, their faces murderous. Forks and knives weren't the most intimidating weapons, but held within the sinewy fists of the warriors, they looked quite able to return the pain and inconvenience the troll's reckless actions had caused.

Before the vengeance-minded pinkskins could reach the instigator of the whole mess, rapid footsteps echoed through the hall. "Hey, you over there! Break it up!" a clear female voice shouted, making itself heard over the growls and jeers. "No brawling in here!"

Kner thought the blonde human in the short blue skirt was rather brave to get between three semi-armed orcs and the target of their ire, even if there was a sword dangling from her belt. Brave, but stupid.

"She ruined our meal. Now we are going to ruin her face!" the tallest of the orcs disagreed, a shard of pottery still stuck in the crease between his frowning brows. He took another step forward.

"Last warning," the blonde hissed, putting her hand on the haft of her weapon.

"I'm not going to take orders from some wiry human worm playing at being a warrior," the orc replied, looking as if he was about to charge ahead anyway. "Bring it, if you think you can take us on!"

"Ahem," a warlock interrupted, stepping up behind him. The mage leaned down to the orc's ear, grinning like the cat that ate the canary. "Congratulations, you just managed to insult our Empress' second in command and challenge her to a fight. By the way, she quite recently and single-handedly stalled the Avatar's progress by fighting him in single combat."

Kner would always cherish the other orc's look of abject terror and sudden pallor when he realised in just how much trouble he had landed himself.

Cathy, for her part, was already advancing on him, a humourless smile on her face.

Ami fluttered from stalactite to stalactite as she slowly made her way around the gloomy-looking step pyramid in the distance. It wasn't the same one that she had seen in her crystal ball, but similar obelisks lead up to it, and the space around it had the same greenish-tinted, distorted quality.

The Keeper in the body of a bat attached herself to the cavern ceiling, right above one of the tiny huts on the outskirts of the temple complex. Upside down, she managed to touch her ear with the tiny claws on her right wing, and her visor slid over her eyes. Contrary to her expectations, it turned out that bat eyes were fairly sharp and complemented the tiny animals' echolocation. Satisfied that nobody was looking in her direction, she scanned the temple once more, as she had done multiple times from other locations before.

As usual, her sensors immediately warned her of the dark column of suffocating, contaminated mana that poured out of the central basin and suffused the air within the temple. She tentatively classified it as the oppressive power of the dark god, omnipresent within the foreboding structure, but quickly dwindling into nothingness once it spilled over its borders. Only a few concentrated, isolated knots persisted outside of the profane complex, all matching the location of an undead creature. As an unexpected benefit, this helped Ami easily distinguish the few vampires patrolling the area in the shape of bats from real animals. For the moment, she seemed safe. Only a few skeletons were milling about on the dirt paths below, and they rarely looked up.

She went back to the strategic concerns. The death god's power reminded her of the corruption produced by her dungeon heart, only more tangible and less of this world. If she calibrated her visor just right, she could see the strain it put on the very fabric of space here, twisting and distending it even more than usual for the Underworld. The effect was at least partly intentional, since it meant that the temple had no underside that an enthusiastic attacker could dig into. The underground still existed, obviously, since the temple wasn't dropping into some bottomless abyss, but it wasn't where anyone would look for it. Anyone who didn't have the computational power of the Mercury computer at her fingertips, at least.

Ami would have grinned, but her current anatomy was not up to it. She was fairly certain that, with the aid of the data she had recorded, she would be able to find out where she would have to go to attack the place from below. In any case, she would need to do something about Crowned Death's influence within his temples first if she was going to assault them. He would, at the very least, have as much control over the area as any Keeper, and none of the limitations of a finite mana pool. When she got home, she would properly analyse the architecture and geomancy of this one and search for exploitable weakpoints, perhaps by cross-referencing it with her own temple to Metallia.

Ami batted her wings and flew off when one of the skeletal lizards running along the walls seemed to take an interest in her. It made her turn her attention toward the troops guarding the temple. She

liked her chances against them. Ghost, skeletons, and a few vampires. In essence, the same troop composition she had soundly defeated on the Avatar Islands in much greater numbers. The only unknown quantity were the death priests.

Her gaze went down to the shanty town below, where old and decrepit-looking cultists milled about. As far as Ami could tell from their garb, all of them had been magicians of some sort in their heyday. Now, close to the end of their natural lifespan, they were currying favour with Crowned Death's clergy in the hopes of continuing their existence as sentient, magic-using undead. In which case it would be unwise to dismiss the skeletons as a threat. Something else to ponder, Ami thought.

She spread her wings and followed the tunnel down to the lone portal not far from the temple. She had found out pretty much everything she could without entering the enemy structure, which she wouldn't risk. There was one more thing she could do, however. Taleth's presence burned in her mind, and she knew exactly where the undead priest was relative to her location. Well within range of her Keeper powers. For a moment, she considered leaving him alone, but decided against it. She needed to send a strong message, even if she gave away her presence. Besides, he was a critical component for the next phase of her plan.

In bat form, Ami landed between the four megaliths forming the portal and started conjuring small amounts of sticky mud, dampening the stone floor. The next part had to be performed too fast for him or his dark god to react. Preparing herself by mentally going through the necessary sequence of steps four times, Ami concentrated. She took off and burst into a flurry of magical activity. First, force a shabon spray through space into Taleth's location. Grab hold of the mist in the air before it can expand into the available room. Shape it into a fist, grab hold of the treacherous skeleton. Freeze. Initiate Keeper transport on the prisoner. And done!

Ami was now the proud owner of a frozen, captured death priest. She didn't have any claimed terrain nearby to drop him off, though. However, that didn't mean he was stuck forever. In one of her earliest experiments with her powers, Ami had tried to move a giant

beetle into neutral territory. At the border of her claimed land, it had reappeared and hurtled through space, continuing in the direction she had been trying to pull it. Likewise, if Taleth, currently trapped invisibly next to this portal, left the effective range of her Keeper powers, he would by necessity be shunted out of the transport. The fastest way for this to happen would be for Ami to activate the portal and move through. She picked a random, deserted destination and did so rather gleefully. The feeling in the back of her mind that she associated with her Keeper powers hiccuped, alerting her that something unfortunate had just happened.

She flew back through the portal and saw that Taleth and his icy prison had reappeared, smeared out over an area of roughly ten square metres. The bat's eyes glowed crimson as Ami followed up with a strong energy drain on the unholy priest's powdered remains, which coated every surface of the portal. The spell was likely overkill, but she wasn't going to take any chances here. A few weak wisps of greyish flame gathered before her. She thought she heard an ethereal scream as she flapped her wings, dispersing the small wisp like a candle's flame. By now, her ears were picking up the loud ringing of a gong echoing through the tunnels. *Time to get out of here. Huh, what's this?*

Ami's gaze fell onto a blackened stick that stuck out of the rock at an oblique angle, smoking slightly. It took her a moment to identify its spiralling structure. *His staff survived even this?* With a quick spell, a glistening ice golem stood before her.

The animated statue grabbed the artefact, using much of her hydraulically-enhanced strength to pull it out of the rock. When it finally came loose, she fell on her behind from the sudden lack of resistance.

In the meantime, Ami had already picked one of the portal's destinations that led to a non-Underworld location, from where she could teleport herself, the staff-carrying golem, and the tired bat back to her dungeon. Her scouting mission successfully completed, she sent the ice simulacrum ahead through the portal and followed it. At the last moment before she crossed the threshold, she released a strong fireball spell, making it look as if the bat was spitting fire. The conflagration washed over Taleth's remains, filling

the air with steam and fine ash particles.

The complete destruction of the skeleton was not Ami's intention, no matter what it looked like. No, this was the final step of her plan. The spell that let her feel where Taleth was remained active, now pointing her to the cloud of ash and dust intermixed with dirt that was all that was left of him. Anyone visiting or leaving the temple through that portal would drag bits of the contaminated dirt along, allowing her to track their movements. The intelligence she'd gather on the portal network alone was almost invaluable, and she felt confident that this would complement Jered's information-gathering efforts quite nicely.

Back in her dungeon and with her windfall stashed away in a safe vault, Ami was preparing to announce her return when she was disturbed by loud noises. A quick teleport later, she poked her head around a corner and blinked at the sight of a room that looked like a battlefield.

A grey-uniformed figure stood in front of the settling dust clouds, floating at knee height above the ground.

She blinked at the bodies strewn across the floor. "Jadeite? What's going on here?"

A creaking ceiling lamp clattered to the ground as the last nail holding it up came lose. It's impact elicited a muffled yelp of protest from one of the trolls sprawled out on the cold stone.

"There was a slight discipline problem with the newcomers. I'm sure they have learned their lesson and won't ignore me again when I tell them to stop brawling." The dark general smirked at the softly-groaning creatures draped over pieces of smashed furniture.

"They aren't moving much," Ami noted with concern. "That- you drained them of their energy!" she realised and brought her right hand in front of her mouth.

"They clearly had too much of it," Jadeite quipped. Seeing that the

blue-haired girl was unamused, he drifted closer, floating over a pair of pink legs that poked out from underneath a broken table.

"What-" Ami began, tilting back her head to look up at the curly-haired blond who landed softly in her personal space.

"Here." Instead of an answer, Jadeite pulled out a round amulet from his pocket and held it up for Mercury to see. "May I?" He asked, clearly intending to put it around her neck.

He got me a present? Ami thought, freezing up as her glowing eyes widened. She could feel heat rush to her cheeks and inclined her head in embarrassment.

Jadeite interpreted the motion as a nod, and for a moment, she felt his hands brush past her hair as he slipped the amulet's chain over her head, causing her blush to intensify.

"Thank you," Ami said, still surprised. She lifted brass-coloured disc with the Mercury symbol engraved on it and stared at in wonder. It took her a moment to notice the soft glow around the smooth design, and then she almost dropped the innocent-looking object. "You put their energy in there?" she asked in a somewhat squeaky tone of voice. The realisation felt like someone had poured a bucket of cold water over her head.

Jadeite, however, was nodding in satisfaction, and his smile even reached his steel-blue eyes. "It wasn't easy to get it stored like that, but I think it will remain with you even in case you lose another dungeon heart and get pulled into the dark god's realm. If it works like last time, you'll have something to jump-start your escape."

"I- um," Ami felt conflicted. On one hand, him stealing someone's life energy so she could use it felt all kinds of wrong. On the other, him being concerned for her safety made her feel really warm, and it was the first present he had ever given her. And having a way out of the dark god's realm was something she really, really wanted. In the end, she settled on being polite. "Thank you very much, Jadeite. I appreciate the gesture." And she did, really. Still, life energy...

"I am glad you like it," Jadeite said, acting as if he wasn't even

noticing her blush. His expression turned serious, and he pointed at the semi-conscious underlings. "However, I don't think that this will remain an isolated incident. Cathy told me she already had to put a few of the newcomers on ice for being too rowdy and not following her orders."

"Insubordination?" Ami asked, rubbing her chin with the back of her hand. That was a problem she hadn't encountered since 'Marda'. She had rather hoped it would remain that way, since she'd be forced to devise appropriate punishments that even the evil beings working for her would respect. "What is causing this?"

"I'd say that the new batch of minions is simply more unruly than the rest," Jadeite answered with a shrug.

"More unruly than goblins?" Ami asked, shaking her head as she remembered some of the trouble the hyperactive green beings could get themselves into.

"Goblins are used to being bossed around. I think you have been lucky with your servants so far. I rather suspect that these new recruits," he gestured toward the groaning monsters on the ground, "are more representative of what you can expect from typical Underworld hirelings."

"Why would that be the case?" Ami asked, intrigued, but at the same time hoping he was wrong.

"Ignore the goblins, who are easily cowed, and the warlocks, who are quiet and studious by nature," Jadeite began. "The Avatar's trolls were a well-disciplined special case too. Now, aside from them, did you actually have any servants that you didn't beat respect into by defeating them in battle before you hired them?"

Ami pondered this. "Well, there were the bugs and spiders and flies," she said.

Jadeite only waved his hand impatiently at the mention of the simple-minded animals, indicating that they didn't count.

"Oh, yes, actually. Tserk." She paused, briefly recalling the antics of

the often troublesome and stubborn tentacle monster. "You know, you might be on to something there," she admitted.

The blond general smiled. "Indeed. This brings up the question of appropriate punishments, of course. I would suggest more energy drains. It won't do lasting harm, is quick to rectify in an emergency, and will provide you with a useful resource."

Ami could almost hear the implied 'for bribing Metallia with'. She lifted the amulet again, looking at it in silence. A gentle smile sneaked onto her face as she contemplated the gift. "I will consider it."

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Investigation

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With one eye closed, Torian stared at the drop of reddish liquid quivering at the tip of the dropping glass he was holding over a half-filled vial. Would the addition of dragon blood increase the duration of the shape-shifting potion, or would it lead to new and interesting effects? Either way, he was eager to find out. He smirked at the shivering imp sitting on one of desks, tied up with enough rope to make it look like a large-eyed sausage. Unfortunately, he would have to delay his experiment, since he felt the familiar tug of his dark empress dragging him through space.

The well-groomed warlock had expected to arrive in the Empress' study or in the command centre, so the cold wind that sprayed raindrops into his short-bearded face came as an unpleasant surprise. He flinched away from the wet sensation and retracted his head deeper into the high, starched collar of his robes to seek shelter from the elements. He seemed to be on a cliff overlooking the sea, but the iceberg dungeon was nowhere in sight. Against the backdrop of the storm clouds, he spotted the dark-clad form of an ice golem standing nearby. The eyes of the animated statue in the Empress' likeness were crimson slits, and so he bowed deeply in her direction. "Your Imperial Majesty," the dark magician greeted her, hiding his distaste at standing in ashen mud with a grovelling smile. "How may I serve you?"

"Torian. I apologise for dragging you out here in the rain, but I have recovered something that I need a second opinion on before I bring it into the dungeon proper."

Interested and quite pleased that he had been chosen over that annoying blond prettyboy or that snivelling fallen priest, he followed her outstretched arm with his gaze. There, in the shadow of a rock, stood a huge block of ice with something elongated held within.

"Can you identify that item?" the water-filled golem asked.

Torian stepped closer to the object in question, feeling his eyes widen and his pulse accelerate as he saw the rod formed from spiralling bone within the ice. Could this be...? Yes. Yes, the tree-pronged end left no doubt. He had serious difficulties containing the drool gathering in his mouth. "Your Majesty," he asked reverently, but without taking his eyes of the staff. "Where did you find this?"

"You recognise it?" Mercury asked, rather than answering the question.

The purple-dressed man nodded enthusiastically. "This has to be one of the battle staves of the sunken realm of Calarine," he explained. "Very rare and priceless. The secret of how to create them has been lost since that part of the Underworld flooded over a millennium ago. To see one with my own eyes..."

"Interesting, but what does it *do*?" Mercury interrupted, sounding a little impatient.

"Oh, it is a strong amplifier for dark magic," Torian said. "Any spell channelled through this wondrous artefact will end up at least an order of magnitude more powerful than normal. A novice wielding it would be a challenge for the most experienced archmages," he said, gesticulating as if he was wielding the weapon and blowing something up with it. "Now imagine what it can do in the hands of an already powerful warlock, or even a Keeper!"

Mercury blinked once. "I see." The crimson glow in her eyes became more intense. Four walls of metal as thick as Torian's fist grew from the ground, enclosing the artefact. It disappeared from sight as the young empress added a lid on top. She jerked her frozen fingers upwards, and the newly created box shot up into the air.

To Torian's growing horror, the container did not slow down. It ascended through the falling raindrops until it was no more than a rectangular spot in the distance, moving on a ballistic trajectory that would take it out over the ocean. He darted forward until he reached the edge of the cliff, climbing up the rocks with no regard for the dirt he was getting on his expensive robes, and followed the box with his eyes. When it disappeared underneath the salty waves with a splash, his expression probably matched that of a puppy who had

just had a succulent bone snatched out of his bowl. "Your Majesty. Why would you *do* that?" he asked in a petulant, incredulous tone of voice.

"I couldn't be sure before, but now that you confirmed that the object would actually be useful for me, I am quite certain that it was a trap," the female-looking golem explained. "I got the weapon off the body of a death priest that I destroyed. My scans show that the material of the staff contains hundreds of irregular regions whose molecular boundaries do not line up with their neighbours in a strictly continuous way."

Torian tried not to let his face show his confusion while he tried to figure out what the Empress meant. How could he ask for clarification without damaging his carefully-cultivated façade of impeccable competence?

"In other words, it was recently shattered into hundreds of pieces," the Empress elaborated, obviously seeing straight through his mask. "Since that was exactly what I did to the skeleton priest, the staff must have been patched together and left for me to find."

Torian scratched his beard and rolled his eyes upward as he pondered this. "You assume that there is a curse of some sort on it, ready to strike at you the moment you use it?" It made a frightening amount of sense, but still, tossing the invaluable artefact into the ocean seemed like an overreaction to him. He gazed longingly at the spot where it had disappeared underneath the waves. "Perhaps it just has a self-repairing spell on it."

"It doesn't. I cannot properly analyse the inner workings of the device without seeing mana flow through it," the Empress elaborated, "but I can exclude the possibility of there being active enchantments on it."

"Perhaps someone else could use it for you then, your Majesty?" Torian suggested. "If this is really a plot against you, then giving the plan away by harming one of your minions first would be counter-productive. It should be safe to use. I would be willing to-"

"No! I don't want something that Crowned Death may have

sabotaged specifically to harm me anywhere on my territory. The plague the dark gods sent me last time I ran afoul of them has taught me not to leave myself open like that."

"But your Majesty, you should at least observe someone using it in a safe location and create a copy! With your genius and the amount of dragon parts we have, it should be easy!" Torian explained, the sleeves of his robe waving in the wind as he mimed the outlines of two staves.

"Maybe I will recover it from the bottom of the sea when I have time to spare on research projects less specific to my current goals," the ice golem gleaming in the twilight said. "For now, I am happy with where-" Mercury turned her head sharply, narrowing her eyes. An instant later, both the animated statue and Torian found themselves back in the warm, well-lit corridor in front of the library. "I'm afraid we need to cut this discussion short, since something just triggered an intruder alert."

Torian blinked for a moment at the empty spot that the statue had just occupied, then turned on his heel and stormed into the library, throwing the wings of its double door wide open. He headed straight for his desk, not worried about potential invaders. The Empress would deal with them, just as she had dealt with the Avatar. No, he had geography to sketch from memory, treasure maps to draw, and to see about finding a nice, reliable water-breathing spell.

Ami stood on a balcony overlooking the hall full of machinery she had recently constructed. She leaned onto the railing as she looked at the brightly-lit clouds of dry ice fog below, inspecting the rows of identical gem furnaces. Absently, she reached down to her side and handed sunglasses to the large-eyed imp staring up at her. Without them, the tiny worker would be as good as blind in the glare that permeated the room, produced by powerful floodlights that activated whenever someone scryed on the room. They hadn't gone dark yet.

Someone is very interested in what I am doing, Ami mused. She was glad that she had taken steps to prevent others from easily figuring out what was going on.

The imp to her right put the shades on, let out a happy yelp, and darted down the stairs to disappear into the fog. Ami could hear the tiny creature's footsteps join those of the other imps flitting about on the walkways. They were moving vials, refilling glass beakers, and tending to clusters of crystals in all colours of the rainbow. The blue-haired teenager hoped that anyone watching the blurry shadows in the mist would be too busy analysing all this misdirection to figure out how her sapphire production worked.

One of the imps opened a metal hatch in the tub-like bottom of one of the inactive furnaces to perform a rare real maintenance task.

With her Keeper sight, Ami could see a few dark puffs of soot ejected from the device as the imp scrubbed out its interior. So far, so good. However, that wasn't what had brought her to this place. The apparatuses were all purring and bubbling contentedly, operating without a problem and didn't need her supervision. No, her visor was pointed at a large scorch mark on one of the walkways. The grate forming its surface was distorted, partly melted from extreme heat. Something that shouldn't have been in here had triggered one of the lightning traps.

I'll have to tell the warlocks to recharge that one, Ami reminded herself as she checked the charge of the lethal magical device. She had simply opted to copy the regular design used by other Keepers here. It saved her the effort of having to come up with her own friend/foe identification, and the trap was good enough to get the job done. Satisfied with what she was seeing, the girl wearing a blackened Sailor Mercury uniform deactivated her visor and teleported away, leaving a swirl of drifting snowflakes behind.

When Ami arrived in the planning room, the flash of blue alerted Cathy to her presence. The blonde immediately looked up from the table laden with maps she was sitting at and asked "Did you find the intruder?"

Ami raised her hand in a placating gesture. "It was just an imp that had teleported in," she said calmly. "I could still track some of the dispersing mana it was made from."

"A spy, then," Cathy decided. "Or a saboteur. I shudder to think what would happen if one got into the pantry without us noticing. Teleporting enemies are such a pain!"

"Imps skilled enough to use that spell are not exactly common. Also, we have guards, and all food goes through screening wards before it's prepared in the kitchen," Ami reassured the now pacing blonde.

"I'd feel safer if it hadn't been Snyder who made those," Cathy said. "He's getting better, but his skills still don't match the overinflated opinion he has of them," she added.

"It's very in line with what he studied, though," Ami defended the acolyte, "as opposed to me asking him to invent new warding schemes for tasks he has never considered before. Without him, my uniform would still appear on everyone linked to my dungeon hearts whenever I transform."

Cathy nodded hesitantly. "Yes, I suppose that's true. Actually, I never asked how you dealt with the chaotic magic released by that process. Is there a chance for another Boris incident?"

Ami shook her head. "I incorporated the wards into the dungeon heart design, which lets me shunt the run-off directly into the dark gods' realm."

"Sounds fair. They send us their corruption, you send them your toxic waste," the blonde approved.

"To get back on topic, I don't think Crowned Death was behind this intrusion. Unfortunately, I can't be one hundred percent certain, since the imp may have well belonged to a Keeper aligned with him. I would have expected it to probe the defences in that case, though, and not to investigate my production sites."

"Are you going to tighten security because of this?" Cathy asked.

Ami nodded and pulled out her Mercury computer, turning it so that the tall blonde could look over her shoulder onto the screen. A few soft keystrokes later, the small monitor showed a map of the Avatar islands. "Since I want to keep other Keepers out of my realm, I'll

have to claim all of its territory first. Now, even with the boost to my claim that I get from being the land's legitimate Empress," she said, lowering her voice as if embarrassed to bring up her title, "this dungeon heart isn't positioned optimally to guarantee coverage of the entire continent." She hit another key, starting an animation that showed what she meant.

A disc of blue spread outward from a spot on the west coast of the roughly oval-shaped continent, covering more and more of its surface as it travelled east.

"The blue area shows how my influence has been spreading on its own since I was given my title. The amount of land my imps and rats can claim in the same time is negligible compared to this natural extension. However, at the current rate, it's going to take almost a month for the edge of my territory to reach the east coast - assuming the process doesn't slow down with increasing distance."

"That's enough time for an enemy Keeper to dig in and become a real hassle to dislodge, if we don't catch his arrival," Cathy commented.

"That's why I am going to do this." The short-haired teenager reset the animation and dropped a heart-shaped icon onto the map so that it was two thirds of the distance between her current dungeon heart and the eastern coastline. The blueness spread over the continent anew, with a second zone of influence originating from the marker Ami had placed. Since it could now expand to the east and to the west at the same time from the marker, in addition to moving in from the west coast, it covered the distance in a third of the time it needed earlier. "See? With a second dungeon heart here, I can have the continent solidly under my control in around eight days."

"I'm not sure I like that idea. Can we really afford to split our forces to defend both hearts?" Cathy said, creasing her brow.

"We won't have to. I can send the imps ahead to claim a corridor of land leading toward the new location, starting from Wemos' former dungeon. Both dungeon hearts would be connected from the start, allowing me to freely move troops between them." Ami closed her computer and put it away. "Besides, by not designing the new

dungeon to be inhabitable, at least initially, I can vastly increase security. Corridors too small for most creatures to wander through, traps with no need for a safe way to bypass them, that kind of thing."

"That's going to work brilliantly, since enemy imps never make their own entrances." Cathy clearly wasn't too impressed.

"Ah, well," Ami scratched her right cheek with her index finger, not entire sure how the swordwoman would react to the next part. "Even approaching the new dungeon heart could be dangerous. I made some modifications to the design."

"From that forced smile, I conclude that you aren't talking about something like the heart getting up and punching intruders in the face," the blonde suspected, narrowing her eyes as she stared at Ami intently.

"Um, I might have removed some security measures that prevent the corruption from affecting the dungeon proper in exchange for more overall control," the blue-haired girl confessed. "Oh, please don't look at me like that. Nobody is supposed to live there until I have concluded my calibration experiments. In the meantime, I can utilise the violent environmental hazards to keep potential invaders at a distance."

"Well, excuse me for not wanting to suddenly sprout horns or something from bathing in corruption," Cathy snapped. She sighed, visibly calming herself down, then nodded reluctantly. "All right, I can see where you are coming from. Sorry, but I'm a bit nervous right now because Jered hasn't returned from his mission yet.

An old wooden door too shabby for most pigsties creaked open, and a tall orc female with orange-tinted hair appeared in the dark opening. Around her, humid air thick with the stench of cheap alcohol and other intoxicants gushed out into the cooler cavern and condensed into wispy little clouds. She sucked a deep breath into her nostrils and stepped out, ducking her head so she wouldn't bump against the tavern's faded sign, which hung crooked from the last nail holding it. Alert little eyes scanned the area for threats

before she looked back over her shoulder and waved her mace in a come-hither gesture. "All clear, boss."

A second orc emerged from the darkness of the pub, which was little more than a hole in the rock that had been nailed up with a bunch of planks. He was smaller and leaner than the female, but a multitude of old scars gave his skin a battle-worn appearance. In the dim light of the two skulls carved into lanterns that flanked the door, he looked almost like a very pink patchwork zombie. He spat on the floor and shot a glare at a lone troll passing by in the street.

The greenskin met the gaze of the obvious thug, taking note of how the long-maned orc's hand was moving toward the dagger at his belt, and looked away quickly, increasing his pace.

Satisfied, the boss stepped out of the doorway, making room for a second orc female whose left arm was in a sling. She had skin so dark it was almost violet and moved to blend in with the shadows as easily as if she was doing it by instinct. He let his gaze wander over the shacks and side caverns that made up the bulk of this backwater Underworld village once more, looking disappointed. "Just sit at the portal and wait for him to get back, eh?"

"That's what the bartender said, boss," the darker-coloured of the two female orcs grunted.

"Well, can't be helped, then. Come on," he ordered and started walking.

The others fell in step at his side. The group moved in silence toward the portal on the hill, past the thorny, black-leaved creepers eking out an existence in the light that the orange glow between the four megaliths provided.

"Ambush him?" the mace-wielding female asked as they got near the magical gate.

"If we can," the boss confirmed. "Probably won't be able to. Can't tell which direction he'll be coming from with that portal."

The orcs didn't have to strain their patience for too long. At one end

of the portal, five transparent figures appeared, becoming more solid the closer they got to the centre of the gateway. They all looked human at first glance, but their black-robed leader certainly wasn't. Humans generally didn't float or have red irises and fangs. The quartet following him with shuffling steps did look like a common peasant family, though. All four of them had the glazed eyes and flaccid facial muscles of people who were enslaved by a vampire's mind control.

"Hey you, wait!" the boss orc said, holding up his palm as the vampire moved towards one of the megaliths, intent on touching the huge stone column and connecting the portal to his next destination.

"What is it, orcs?" the bloodsucker answered, not bothering to uncross his arms. He looked at the pink-skinned creature as if it was some kind of disgusting vermin that had suddenly scuttled out from underneath a wet rock. "Your companions can stop hiding, I can hear their heartbeats."

Slowly, the two females emerged from a stone pillar each.

"I've got a question," the boss said, pointing at the vampire's thralls. "I've heard the priests of Crowned Death are paying well for live sacrifices. That true?"

"Your information is accurate. Is that all?"

"We could use some extra gold," the orc said. "What do we need to do?"

"Obviously, you will need to secure some sacrifices and bring them to the death priests," the vampire said, sneering. "You can find them at their temples, or at the markets of Nirnak, Geruune, and Blackmine." He turned away, obviously losing interest in the conversation.

"I thought they wanted live sacrifices?" the darker-skinned of the females asked. She pointed at the leather-clad male of the dumbly-staring group, whose shoulder was caked with dried blood. "Doesn't look as if he'll make it much longer."

"They don't need to last longer than two, three more days, so it doesn't matter if they end up a bit roughed up. In fact, the proper set of injuries can be quite convenient if it prevents escape attempts. Has your ignorance been suitably diminished now?"

The orc leader seemed to weigh some options in his head, and his face split into a wide, uneven grin. "Actually, no. We'll be taking those prisoners of yours. Much easier than finding our own."

The vampire laughed. "You must be insane to challenge one such as me!" He spread his arms and drifted closer. "Insolent fools. You could have found well-paying employ anywhere, now that the Keepers are all accelerating their plans because of the Avatar's return. But no, you had to try a get-rich-quick scheme that is going to do nothing but provide me with a snack!"

"Mareki, deal with this," the orc boss ordered, ignoring the threats.

The lighter female's form blurred and rippled as she unhinged her jaw and reverted into her green-tressed, tailed youma form. A strong blast of water shot from her maw toward the sharp-fanged undead monster.

While the vampire was startled for a moment by the unexpected transformation, he still reacted with the speed of a striking cobra and dodged to the side.

Mareki simply swept the continuous stream sideways, close to the ground, not even bothering to aim precisely. As soon as it passed underneath the vampire, he burnt up into black sludge, brought low by his inability to cross water.

"Good. Umbra, get us all out of here before he revives and comes back," Jered said.

The humans, snapping out of their daze now that the vampire was gone, started screaming. The male was howling from pain and confusion, his wife in fright at his state, and their children in pure terror at the sight of the three monsters facing them.

Jered saw the young girl cling harder to her older brother, and

spotted the way their eyes widened as he approached. "And get this glamour off me!"

Last edited: Dec 4, 2016

Deadline

Originally on 2011-03-21T20:22:00

Maggie opened her eyes, feeling drowsy. Confused by the softness of her mattress, she blinked as bright light blinded her. *This isn't my bed,* she realised with a start, and her heartbeat quickened. Her leg muscles felt as if they were burning up, and she felt thirsty enough that drinking directly from a filthy pond sounded like an attractive option. Where was she? Jumbled, terrifying memories of the past hours returned . *The monsters! The vampire!* Paling, she struggled to sit up, wishing her eyes would adjust faster to the brightness. *Light, please let Johann and the children be safe!*

The peasant woman's head whipped left and right, surveying the blurry shapes in the room. There! That wild mop of brown hair in the bed next to hers belonged to her husband! The momentary relief at finding a family member was washed away by the realisation that something was leaning over him. Something dark-coloured with crimson, glowing eyes that had its black hands on his blood-drenched chest. Maggie's scream sounded hoarse as it forced its way out of her dry, sandpaper-like throat. Panicking, she grabbed the first thing she got her hands on and hurled it at the monster threatening her husband.

"Wha-" The blur's startled red eyes widened in surprise just before the pillow smacked into its face.

Maggie heard a satisfying thud as Johann's attacker toppled backward. She could see better now and fought to free herself from the linens so she could rush to her husband's aid. Suddenly, hands grabbed her shoulder from behind, restraining her movement.

"Empress! Are you all right?" a male voice called from behind her.

Empress? There was no empress, the Shining Concord's Emperor remained unmarried so far, Maggie thought. She tried to rip herself loose from her captor's grip and repeatedly rammed the back of her skull into his chest. Unfortunately, she couldn't see him to aim

properly, and she was feeling as weak as a tired kitten.

A blue-haired head popped up from behind her husband's bed, belonging to a girl who blinked at the one-sided struggle with large, crimson-glowing eyes. "I'm fine, Snyder."

Blue hair? Wait. Oh no, no, NO! Maggie remembered in what context she had heard the combination of 'blue hair' and 'empress' before, and the red eyes only served to confirm her terrible suspicion. So did the scandalously short skirt she could see once the teenager got up. *I just whacked the Dark Empress herself in the face with a pillow!* Maggie's mind gibbered in terror. She fainted.

Ten minutes later, Ami and Snyder appeared in the planning room, where Cathy, Jered, and Jadeite were already sitting around the round central table.

"I hate this," Ami said, hanging her head. "I'm not a monster."

"That family was under a lot of stress recently. The poor woman was not thinking straight," Snyder comforted her as he pulled out his chair and sat down next to Jadeite. "I am sure she would not have acted the way she did under better circumstances."

"What happened?" Cathy wanted to know and leaned forward, peering at the sullen-looking girl with interest.

"The older female patient woke up while Mercury was closing her husband's wounds, misjudged the situation, and attacked her with a pillow," Snyder reported with a blank face.

"A pillow?" Jered raised an eyebrow, grinning, and Ami heard a snort from Jadeite's direction.

"Is that family going to make a full recovery?" Cathy asked, referring to the prisoners Jered had liberated.

Ami nodded with a weak smile. "A little rest and they should be fine. The father lost a lot of blood, but the others are only overexerted and dehydrated." Her expression soured, and one black-gloved

hand closed into a fist. "That vampire had them walk with no regard for their health, even the children." Her brows still furrowed, she focused her attention on the green-shirted man sitting across the table from her. "Jered, you have news about Crowned Death's plans?"

"Yes. In short, we are in trouble," he answered. "The vampire mentioned that his captives only needed to last two or three days longer. That gives us a definite deadline for when Crowned Death wants to conduct this desecration ritual."

"Two days? He can gather that many innocents in that little time?" Ami felt like crying. She was just a schoolgirl, and now, several thousand people would live or die by her decisions. It was not an easy burden to shoulder. She sighed and brushed a lock of blue hair out of her face. Feeling sorry for herself would not save those poor people. Her expression became one of determination as she opened her palmtop computer, ready to develop a plan that maximised their chances of survival. "Please tell me you have found out where they are going to conduct the ceremony."

The wavy-haired man fidgeted, moving his fingers over his bandoleer of daggers. "Unfortunately, I wasn't able to get a precise location. Sacrifices are being brought to the Crowned Death temples and to Nirnak, Geruune, and Blackmine, which are three of the major Underworld cities."

"They cannot perform the ritual at any of those places," Snyder spoke up suddenly. "It has to take place from sundown to midnight, and there is no sun in the Underworld."

"That's an excellent point," Ami said, looking up from her computer. "That cuts down dramatically on the number of potential locations." Her fingers started to race over the keyboard, producing a continuous rattling sound.

"I see," Jadeite said. "Are there any temples to Crowned Death in this world?"

"They would not exist independently of some enemy dungeon, I think," Cathy said, "since they'd need the additional protection. In the

Underworld, they can more or less rely on their worshippers."

"Unfortunately, looking for temples alone won't do," Ami explained in a chagrined tone of voice. "I was asked to perform the ceremony, and I don't have a temple dedicated to him. So that's not a requirement."

"They'll need to get the mantle out of a temple's basin, though," Cathy protested.

"They can do this at any time and at any location," Jadeite said, "their vampires and priests can teleport with it to the final destination. I'm not surprised that didn't occur to a violent woman such as you, though."

"Jadeite, don't needlessly antagonise the others." Ami shot a reproachful look in the man's direction.

He nodded once, completely ignoring the swordwoman's angry look.

"A temple would, however, provide several key strategic advantages to ensure an undisrupted ceremony," Snyder said. "Such as the power of Crowned Death himself to defend the mantle, as well as scrying protection to prevent Mercury from simply grabbing the garment with her ice hand."

"Right. Not necessary, but very desirable," Jered said. "Does that help narrow things down, Mercury?"

The blue-haired girl looked up from her work. "It does help me adjust the probabilities for different locations somewhat," she said with a sigh, "but so many possibilities still remain."

"I think the sacrifices will be the key in finding the location of the rite," Jadeite said. "Even with portals, moving thousands of people won't be easy."

Ami nodded. "You are right." She raised her hand, and a large world map dropped onto the table and unfolded before them. With a glance at the display of her computer and back, she summoned a pencil and quickly made a series of adjustments to the annotations on the canvas.

"All right, let's talk logistics," Cathy said, glaring at the dotted lines in red ink blossoming outwards from a spot in the ocean. They corresponded to the movements of Taleth's dust that Ami was able to track.

Ami shoved her palmtop aside and joined the others in studying the patterns. Straight lines between two dots denoted a direct portal connection. Put together, these segments formed longer chains that reached outwards from where she had destroyed the dark priest, branching at some points. Some of the routes led to locations underneath the ocean, and a few even to spots in her realm.

"What's here?" the swordswoman asked, pointing at the dots in question. "Should we do something about that?"

"I had the warlocks scry on those first," Ami replied. "They found only tiny settlements or lone portals. I sent a few imps to keep an eye on them anyway, but I don't expect problems from those." She returned her attention to the lines spreading like a distorted spider web. The vast majority of routes went off to the more populated western continent. In contrast, not a single one got even close to the shore of the Shining Concord Empire to the south, the blue-haired girl noted with interest.

"The lines in thicker ink represent more frequently-travelled paths?" Jered asked, moving his finger along one of the bolder east-west connections.

"It means that more of Taleth's remains ended up moving that way," Ami said, "which I hope means the same thing."

Cathy was silently counting the red dots in the meantime. "If I interpret this correctly, then it's possible to travel halfway around the world by taking less than thirty portals," the scar-faced blonde said after a while, sounding awed. She turned to Mercury. "With that kind of mobility, you could deploy forces anywhere within a few hours. Makes me wonder why Keeper Mukrezar didn't conquer the entire world after he was done with the Avatar Islands."

"He couldn't have used them. About half of the portals marked here are claimed by Keepers and can probably be rendered impassable

at a moment's notice," Ami said. "All the ones not in the Underworld, in fact."

"And yet they let the death priests pass?" Snyder asked in a worried tone of voice.

Jered shrugged. "A few vampires or skeletons passing through with prisoners aren't worth the hassle of getting one of the dark gods mad at you, I guess."

"They wouldn't let *us* pass if we freed the captives," Ami said quietly. She looked at Jadeite, meeting his eyes in a silent plea for help.

The curly-haired blonde shook his head. "I can't transport that many people to the surface, sorry," he dashed her hopes. "Besides, you shouldn't be thinking about rescuing the sacrifices, but rather about reclaiming that mantle."

"Jadeite, that-"

The dark general held up his white-gloved palm, interrupting the scowling girl. "The enemy will simply abduct more surfacers to replace the lost ones. You need to get to the root of the problem, and that's not going to happen if you pre-empt the ritual."

Ami's lips turned into a thin line as she frowned and lowered her head, but she couldn't argue with his logic.

Cathy broke the oppressive silence. "Anyway, they'll have to get all the sacrifices to a single location when the time is right. They'll want to make sure that no Keeper will bar them passage on a whim and ruin everything, so they'll only use portals belonging to allies."

"Allies who will get to use the corrupted mantle in return for protecting the access routes?" Jered pondered.

Ami straightened her back and met their eyes, suddenly looking eager. "That means I can filter out most locations simply by checking which ones can't be reached in a few portal transits from each of Crowned Death's four temples and the three cities Jered mentioned!" She quickly entered the new data into her computer, and many potential nodes faded out. "Still too many. I'll need more

information about the Keepers who hold those portals."

As of its own volition, her pencil started circling several dots on the map.

Ami waved her hand, and a short-bearded warlock appeared in the room, looking rather startled. "Torian, I have a new task for your warlocks."

The black-bearded man immediately bowed deeply, fumbling around with his wide sleeves while the gesture of respect hid his hands. "I hear and obey, my Empress."

"Wait, what was that rectangular thing that just disappeared down your left sleeve?" Jered interrupted, tilting his head to the side. He had a better view of the warlock's action from his side of the round table.

"That?" Torian sweated a bit, but smiled winningly. He shook his right arm, and something whitish and almost square dropped into his hand "Oh, that's just a sandwich," he said with a grin, "I did not want to appear unprofessional." Seeing Jered's suspicious look, he demonstratively took a large bite out of the object in question. Small droplets of sweat appeared on his brow as he chewed, making crunching noises.

"I do not expect perfect adherence to protocol when I summon you without prior warning," Ami said to cut the discussion short. She quite liked sandwiches herself. "Now, have a look at this map, please. I need you and your warlocks to find out which Keepers have laid claim to these portals, as well as with whom said Keepers are allied and which deities they worship. This is urgent."

The purple-robed warlock simply bowed in reply, and the map rolled up and flew over to him. Without a further word, he strode out of the room.

Ami turned to the others. "Jadeite, Jered, assist him with the investigation, please. We really need that information as soon as possible. I will be asking the Avatar for help."

Once Torian was out of sight, he stopped, looked carefully left and right, and spat out a wad of pulpy mass. With a sour expression on his face, he looked at the sandwich in his hand. It wavered and reverted back to its true form, which was a magical tome on partial amphibian transformations. A large, bite-shaped section was missing from the book. That had been a close call. With an angry growl, he tossed the damaged tome to the ground, pointed a finger at it, and let loose a fist-sized bolt of fire. Oh well, he'd better hurry and finish his newly assigned task.

"Oh joy, another Keeper," the severe-looking woman in the crystal ball said, looking decidedly unimpressed.

Ami blinked, rather taken aback by the fact that her attempt to contact the Avatar had been redirected to this grey-haired, elderly priestess. Somehow, the idea of the Avatar having an uncooperative secretary taking his calls had never occurred to her. "Who are you? I need to talk to the Avatar. It's urgent!"

"You wouldn't believe how often I get to hear that every day," the woman sighed. "He is currently unavailable and not going to take time out of his busy schedule to exchange banter with someone such as you, Keeper. Unless you are on his list of targets, of course. If not, you'll have to make an appointment like everyone else. In the meantime, I'll be happy to note down any curses, death threats, and oaths of vengeance you may wish to leave for him," the secretary said in a long-suffering tone of voice.

Ami gaped at her audacity. "None of that! I really need to talk to him! Thousands of innocent lives are at stake!"

The secretary's sardonic smile turned to disgust. "Oh, it's a blackmail attempt, then? I am not even supposed to pass those along, you are wasting your time."

"No!" Ami took a deep breath to calm herself, trying not to let her irritation show. "I am Sailor Mercury, current Empress of the Avatar Islands, and I only want to talk to the Avatar."

"I'm sure you are, *your Majesty*" the priestess quipped. She peered a bit closer at her own crystal ball. "Well, at least you did your research and got the hairstyle and colour right. You'd be surprised how many other Keepers already fail at that basic step. All that dark magic rots the brain, if you ask me."

Ami was getting frustrated with the wrinkled woman's openly antagonistic attitude. "Shouldn't you be more helpful as the Avatar's secretary?" she asked, not rising to the bait.

"Not really. The opportunity to taunt horrible people is one of the perks of this job. Oh, and what you are seeing here is a disguise, so I'm not particularly worried about you tracking me down," the woman said, adding a spiteful giggle. "In any case, if you were the real one, you would have know that Empress Mercury is the *last* person he wants to talk with right now, Keeper."

"Actually, that is the real Mercury," a cold, wheezing voice said from somewhere to the left, outside of Ami's field of view.

The secretary turned her head in the speaker's direction and gasped. "Lord Avatar? You should not be out of bed!"

The tall figure of the Avatar appeared, glowering at Ami. The furious gleam in his eyes almost managed to distract her from his gaunt appearance and the way he was leaning on the table for support. "What is it Mercury? Have you come to gloat about finding a way to attack me through the Mantle? Was our agreement so confining that you took the first opportunity to try and get rid of me for good?" he asked acidly.

Ami gaped, speechless for the moment as she processed his accusations. *He thinks I attacked him?*

"I should have known never to trust a Keeper! But you failed. The Light protects me from your efforts, and I shall recover in time. Then, there will be a reckoning!"

Ami bowed her head and folded her hands apologetically, deeply disturbed by what she had learned. "I'm sorry. Please believe me, this is the first I learned of your sickness. The mantle was stolen

from me, and I was going to ask for your help to get it back! I didn't even know it could be used to harm you," she blurted out.

The Avatar stroked his beard. "Neither did I, obviously, or I would not have left it behind." His glare did not recede much, but he seemed to at least consider the possibility that she was telling the truth. He remained silent for a moment, perhaps conversing with the Light. "Stolen, you say?" he barked, then broke into a cough. "By whom, and how could you allow that to happen?"

Ami flushed with embarrassment. "A priest of Crowned Death tricked me when I attempted to use the artefact against him," she confessed.

Amadeus hissed. "Him again! He would be the dark god who knows my Mantle best, though."

"He is planning to conduct a ritual soon to corrupt it completely," Ami said, then continued sharing the details she had learned.

The Avatar listened, his face grim, and a faint white glow appeared in his eyes. When he spoke next, it was not in his own voice. "This is unfortunate. Our Avatar is not hale enough to assist you directly with the mantle's retrieval. However, the link between him and the garment cuts both ways. Once it is back from the dark ones' realm, We will be able to activate an echo of Our power within it. For a time, the Mantle will be unmoveable and inviolate. Our enemy's servants will not be able to flee with it. You must take that opportunity to seize it, as there will be no second chance."

No pressure, Ami thought. "Thank you, that will help a lot," she said sincerely. "I'll do my best to get it back, I promise!" Prompted by her curiosity, she asked "Do you know Crowned Death's goal? What can he do with the desecrated mantle?" Ami asked.

The Avatar spoke once more, his eyes still a pure white "His priest lied to you. The mantle cannot be desecrated without the blood of our Avatar. Instead, this ritual will consume it as fuel for a powerful summoning to bring one of the dark god's horrors into this world."

"Oh."

"Empress, you had better not screw this up," the Avatar said, now in his own voice. The sneeze that followed immediately thereafter ruined his haughty pose somewhat.

"Was there anything else, your Majesty?" the secretary asked, intruding into the crystal ball's field of view. Her expression was more bemused than calculating now.

Ami shook her head in the negative.

"Good." The crystal ball faded into darkness. Before the light within was completely gone, Ami could hear a reproachful "...and now let's get you back to bed, Lord Avatar."

A few hours later, everyone was back in the planning room, assembled around the table. All was silent as Ami typed on her palmtop, entering information about the Keepers into her program. The stack of sheets to her side grew smaller and smaller as she worked. Suddenly, her computer let out a loud beep, and her eyes widened as she saw the readout. "I got it!" She shouted, standing up and thrusting her fist into the air. "Here!" Her index finger stabbed down onto a tiny island not far from the western continent's east coast.

"Are you sure?" Jered said as he watched her lean forward to mark the seven routes connecting prisoner locations to the likely ritual site. "No, that can't be right. That portal over there belongs to Keeper Avernus, for example. He worships the Mighty Tyrant." His finger moved to another connection. "This one here is claimed by a follower of the Unraveller. He's an enemy of Crowned Death."

Ami's smile didn't waver. "It's misdirection. Both of those Keepers serve Keeper Clairmonte and will do whatever he wants them to do. As it turns out, the dungeon on the destination island belongs to him, too."

"I see," Jered nodded. "Objection retracted."

Cathy furrowed her brow in worry. "It's far away. How are we

supposed to get our troops over there in less than two days? On the shortest path, we'd have to," she glanced at the map, "stomp six Keepers for their portals."

"I suppose we should get started, then," Jadeite said with a grin. "Those fools are nowhere as powerful as our former enemies, and will not stand long against the might of the Dark Kingdom!"

"Well, 'general', how are we going to beat all of them without any of the others on the same route noticing and shutting down their own gates?" Cathy replied.

Jadeite choked on his confident laugh, his cheeks reddening in anger as his miscalculation was pointed out.

"I have an idea," Ami said, "but I'll need the help of my friends."

Last edited: Dec 4, 2016

Arranging Transportation

Originally on 2011-03-28T02:04:00

Luna dashed down the corridor, her soft paws making no sound on the smoothed wooden floor. She arrived in front of the door to Rei's room, which had been left slightly ajar for just that occasion. Quickly, the black mooncat squeezed her way in through the gap and whispered "Everyone, grandpa Hino is coming! Drop your transformations, quickly!"

The eyes of the three sailor senshi within the chamber widened slightly at the warning. Sailor Jupiter, standing next to the door, nodded and slid it shut. An instant later, her green skirt and white leotard dissolved into invisibility and were replaced by Kino Makoto's regular white and brown school uniform. She looked ahead, past the low table, where pink ribbons fluttered briefly around Sailor Moon as she turned back into her civilian form. This left Sailor Mars, who was currently floating horizontally in the air, facing the ceiling and making swimming motions.

A red flash later, Rei looked like a normal shrine maiden again. Her violet eyes widened in alarm when she realised that she was still hanging in the air like a gas-filled balloon, with no indication that the flying spell she was trying to master would wear off any time soon. She concentrated and tried to lower her altitude, but only managed to do a somersault in mid air. "Get me down!" she hissed urgently.

Already hearing footsteps approaching outside, Makoto dashed forward and jumped. At the apex of her leap, she managed to encircle the raven-haired girl's waist with her arms. Holding on tightly, she let her weight drag the two of them back to the ground. With the help of a quick throw, the shrine maiden landed right on a pillow in front of the table and winced slightly from the impact. "Sorry," Makoto whispered as she hurried over to her own seat.

Across the table from the pony-tailed brunette, Usagi gasped in dismay when she looked over at her long-haired friend. Rei was in a

kneeling position, but rising off the ground again, even though she was gripping the edge of the table with both hands.

A squat silhouette holding a tablet became visible through the paper door. "Girls? I brought you some tea," grandpa Hino called. He tilted his bald head to the side curiously when nobody answered him and sounds of a scuffle came from within room insted. "I'm coming in," he announced after waiting for a moment.

The door slid aside, and his bushy eyebrows crept up his forehead at the sight within. His granddaughter was sprawled out on the floor, with her friend Usagi sitting on her legs. What was going on? He met the green eyes of Makoto, who was sitting in front of the homework-covered table and looking at him over her shoulder with a slightly nervous expression.

"USAGI! I told you that you can't have this manga!" Rei screeched, hiding something under her back with one hand while trying to shove the blonde off with the other.

The look of confusion on her grandfather's face dissolved into a smile as he recognised the familiar pattern. "I see you girls are having fun, but shouldn't you be doing your homework?"

"Ah, that..." Usagi said, sitting up and looking at him with a sheepish expression.

Makoto suddenly loomed before the short priest. "Thank you for the tea," she said, bowing briefly before taking the tablet from him.

"It's the least I can do for such nice young ladies like you," he answered, smiling back at her. A slight frown creased his forehead as he leaned to the side to see past her, sweeping his gaze over the room as if searching for something. "Oh well. I have to get back to the customers. Are you sure that none of you want to become assistant shrine maidens here?"

"Grandpa!" Rei raised her voice, managing to sound both exasperated and irate at the same time.

Chuckling, the elderly man departed, sliding the door shut behind

him.

The three girls and one cat remained quiet until they could hear his footsteps fade in the distance, then simultaneously let out a relieved breath.

"Whew. That was a close one," Usagi said, wiping a light sheen of perspiration from her brow.

"Usagi." Rei began.

"Yes?"

"Get off me! You are heavy!"

The blonde sitting on the shrine maiden's red-clad legs looked down, suddenly remembering where she was. "Oh, sorry!" Her embarrassed expression soon turned into a pout. "Wait, are you calling me fat?"

"Just get off!" Rei ordered, backing up the command with a shove. She managed to dislodge the pigtailed girl from her perch, but couldn't stop herself from zooming off into the air again from the recoil.

As Makoto hurriedly chased after the black-haired girl before she could bump into the wall, Luna emerged from her hiding place under the bed. "I believe he's suspecting something," the cat muttered, "he's interrupting us more frequently than he used to."

"He might be able to sense the magic we are using," Rei speculated. "Given the spell's origin, it might feel evil." She was currently anchored in place courtesy of Makoto holding onto her leg, and looked longingly down at the floor. "How long is it supposed to last again?"

"It usually wore off after around five minutes for me, before I learned how to cancel it myself," a new voice said.

"Gah!" Usagi jumped, her pigtails whipping around as she searched for the speaker.

Makoto shifted into a combat stance for a moment, but relaxed after remembering where she had heard the girl's voice before. She idly noted Luna arching her back, looking as bushy as a regular startled cat.

Warned by her mystical senses, Rei was the only one not surprised. She simply pointed at her chest of drawers. "The crystal ball is in the top drawer. Hello, Sailor Mercury."

Ami sat in front of her desk, a smile on her face as she watched her friends through the glowing orb before her. Their own crystal ball now rested on the table, amidst various textbooks and sheets. The blue-haired girl suppressed a wince as she spotted two errors in one of Usagi's math exercises at first glance. "Hello, everyone!"

Luna jumped on the table and sat down right in front of the glowing orb. "Hello," she replied for the others.

"Um, is something wrong?" Ami asked, her smile fading a bit at the mooncat's unusually serious tone. Her friends looked less happy to see her than she wood have expected. Makoto was crossing her arms and sitting with her back straight, Usagi's face wavered between happy and worried, and Rei looked annoyed. However, in the latter's case, her irritation seemed to be directed more at the large stack of books on her lap necessary to keep her from floating away.

"Yes," Luna said simply. "Who are you really?"

Ami blinked, getting a sinking feeling about this. Why would Luna ask her a question like that? "I'm Sailor Mercury. You know me!"

"Liar! We used the crystal ball to look at your dungeon and saw that you kept the real Ami in prison! Let her go!" Sailor Moon demanded heatedly.

Ami boggled for a moment at the absurdity of the statement before she realised what they were talking about. "You mean Tiger," she stated, more to herself.

An instant later, a figure that looked like Mizuno Ami appeared next to the Keeper, Dressed in a rumpled and dusty school uniform. She looked around, confused at first, but then her gaze focused on the crystal ball and the people shown within. Recognition flitted over her features.

The real Ami pointed at the newcomer. "She's-"

"Help!" the second Ami interrupted in a piteous tone of voice "She's making me work in the mines!"

The faces of the teenage Keeper's friends turned from suspicious to outright hostile. Ami's heart ached from seeing Usagi glare at her with such intensity.

"So you *are* evil!" Luna declared, swishing her tail.

Ami buried her face in her hands. "It's not true! She's a youma! Show them!" she ordered, turning to the glamoured copy of her civilian form.

Tiger said nothing, tilted her head to the side, and frowned at her.

"Right. *She*'s the youma," Rei commented, letting her gaze wander from the pale, glowing-eyed and black-clad Keeper to the tired-looking schoolgirl and back. It didn't take a genius to figure out how believable she thought that story was.

Ami felt the urge to bash her head into her desk repeatedly. Why did Tiger have to be difficult now when she was already strapped for time? "Shabon Spray!" she shouted, going through the arm movements for the spell. A scintillating beam of bubbles shot forth, filling the room with mist. Ami ended the spell after a few seconds and addressed the crystal ball. "I believe this demonstrates that I am, in fact the real Sailor Mercury. The copy cannot even transform."

"That's because you stole my power!" the youma accused, pointing with her index finger at the real Ami.

"That's not possible, and you know it!" Ami snapped back at her double. "Why are you doing this? This isn't funny! Stop using that

glamour!"

Rather than complying, the youma asked "If I'm not Mizuno Ami, then who am I?"

"Well, you-" Ami hesitated and became immediately aware of how bad that pause would look. "I call you Tiger, but that's because you refuse to give your real name." Inwardly, she winced. If this had actually been an excuse, it would have sounded rather lame. That it was the truth didn't make things better, unfortunately.

"You have already shown us that you can give Sailor Mercury's powers to other people!" Makoto said, remaining sceptical.

"Well, we can test your statements easily enough," Luna said. "If she's really just a youma, she won't know our names."

"Usagi, Rei, Luna, Makoto," Tiger stated, not missing a beat.

The hostility of the glares directed at Ami increased.

Briefly, the young Keeper considered just possessing the uncooperative youma and forcibly using her own skills against her. Unfortunately, from the other senshi's perspective, that would look as if she was simply turning their friend into a monster. "She's really just a youma," she tried to explain again. "Some of my memories imprinted on her when I possessed her body while her real personality lay dormant. I put her to work digging tunnels since her powers are earth-based. Besides, she just made a mistake."

The glamoured creature's eyes widened slightly, and she looked puzzled.

"If she was really me and had been imprisoned up to now, she wouldn't know Sailor Jupiter's name!" Ami finished.

Seeing the unsure expressions on the other girls' faces, the double quipped "That would perhaps be true if you didn't like gloating about your plans so much!"

Ami was getting really frustrated now. She didn't have time to deal with this. *"Jadeite! Come to my room please!"*

The dark general appeared in a column of purplish light and looked momentarily confused by the presence of a second blue-haired girl. Ami's crimson eyes told him who was who, though. "Yes, your Majesty?" he addressed her, though he did throw an interested glance sideways at the active crystal ball.

"If you want to convince us, then Jadeite is not exactly the most trustworthy witness," Rei's voice came from the scrying device.

Ami ignored her in favour of the grey-uniformed man. "How do you make a youma revert back to her true form when she refuses to?" she asked, pointing a black-gloved thumb at the youma standing at her side.

"Oh, that's easy," the grey-uniformed blonde said and thrust his palm forward, causing the fake Ami to pale and take a step back.

"Now wait just- eeep!"

A ripple of force slammed into the Ami-lookalike, lifting her off her feet and hurling her toward the wall at breakneck speed.

Horrified, high-pitched screams of "Ami!," "No!" and "Jadeite, you bastard!" came from the crystal ball as the fake slammed into the masonry hard enough to make a picture frame rattle. The other senshi quieted down when they saw what slid down the wall and landed with a thud on the carpet.

"Ow! Ouch!" Tiger groaned as she glowered at them from the ground. She now looked somewhat like Ami would if she gained a head in height, sprouted short horns, took up body building, and developed a strange skin condition. The black-striped youma whose school uniform now strained at the seams pulled herself to her feet and rubbed the back of her head. "You are no fun at all!"

Jadeite smirked at Ami. "A pleasure to be of service."

Ami turned back to the crystal ball, where her friends were looking rather sheepish.

"We are sorry, Sailor Mercury," Luna said, "but we are worried about you. When it looked as if you had been taken prisoner..."

"I understand," the blue-haired girl said, smiling at them. "I'd have reacted the same way in that situation, and it looked pretty bad." She turned to the culprit and glared at her youma. "Tiger! What got into you? Why did you do this?"

"It seemed funny at the time," the youma said with a shrug. "Besides, I know how your head works." she put an index finger to her forehead. "You aren't going to do something horrible to me just because of a practical joke!"

"I'm starting to see why Beryl put you into Eternal Sleep," Jadeite commented dryly, then grinned. "However, you are forgetting something important. Just because she won't punish you properly doesn't mean that I have the same inhibitions against teaching you your proper place!" Dark energy crackled around his right hand as it gathered into a black sphere.

"Ack!" Tiger took cover behind Ami, putting her hands on the smaller girl's shoulders as she put her into the potential line of fire. "You aren't going to let him hurt me, right, little sister?"

"Little sister?" Ami asked, flabbergasted at the sudden change in the creature's attitude.

"Well, I remember having the same parents as you, and since I didn't have any before..."

Ami blinked. That strange leap of logic even made a tiny amount of sense, in a twisted way. "That's not really how it works," she said, still irritated.

"That's enough from you," Jadeite commented, though Ami thought he was masking some amusement. "Time to face the music."

"Wait, I have something to say in my defence," the muscular youma hiding behind Ami blurted out, keeping her head ducked safely behind her human shield.

"Oh?" Jadeite hesitated, raising an eyebrow.

Tiger nodded, her expression grave. "Yes. One word: CATCH!"

Two strong hands grabbed Ami under the shoulders, and suddenly, she was hurtling like a missile towards the startled dark general. She saw his steel-blue eyes widen in surprise and his arms come up in reflex before she slammed into him. He was strong enough that her impact merely rocked him backwards, rather than sending both of them tumbling to the floor.

"Mwahaha!"

Ami heard the youma's laughter fade out behind her and turned around. Where Tiger had been, a stalagmite-like pillar of rock crumbled into gravel where the she had teleported away. The teenager had to admire the being's tactics. Pressed against Jadeite's warm chest and with his arms wrapped around her, she felt remarkably disinclined to immediately do something about the annoyance.

A second or two later, faint cheering in Usagi's voice reminded her that they were not really alone in the room. While she didn't teleport, she moved quickly enough to make it look as if she had when she put two steps of distance between herself and her crush. *Too bad, that was really comfy,* she thought, as disappointed as she was embarrassed.

"I'll go find that pest," Jadeite broke the awkward silence.

Ami raised a hand, gesturing for him to wait. "We'll deal with her later," she said, smoothing out her clothes and taking a self-conscious step away from the curly-haired blond. Her cheeks felt as if they were on fire as she heard faint giggles from the crystal ball. "I'll need your assistance to make my idea work, so you might as well listen in now." She walked over to the glowing orb. "Everyone, I need your help. It's rather urgent."

"Sure thing," Usagi said. "Do you need some dating advice?" she added with a wink.

"I have about two days to move my troops to an island over three thousand kilometres away, or thousands of people are going to die," Ami said, not reacting to the good-natured teasing. Her statement wiped the mirth from Usagi's face at once, and the others now

listened in rapt attention, too. "I need to see everything you can find in the library about airships. They are the only type of vessel I can think of that would have the required speed, range and transport capacity, while still being simple enough for me to construct without needing to do a lot of research first."

"You can count on us," Makoto said, and the others nodded. "Let's go, girls!"

"They don't look much like ships to me," Cathy commented as she leaned back to look up at the flagship of Mercury's new fleet of five dirigibles. The huge, cigar-shaped vessel strained against its chains as the wind changed direction. She had an umbrella, but left it closed since the airship's bulk protected her from the rain pattering against the dark-coloured hull.

"They are not supposed to," the ice golem Ami was currently possessing replied. "Their shape follows from the need to minimise air resistance." She was watching the rows of reaperbots wandering through the mud and up the ramps into the bare cargo holds of the other four vessels. The ramp of her own flagship was currently occupied by imps doing the terrain-claiming dance as they made the ship part of her dungeon.

"What is the purpose of making the cabin of that airship part of your territory?" Snyder asked, standing at Ami's left. "As I understand it, your claim will fade away soon after it lifts off and loses its connection to the rest of the dungeon. You are not planning to create a dungeon heart on board of that flimsy contraption too, are you?" the acolyte asked, observing the faint aquamarine smoke created by the imps' activity.

"No, I'll maintain the claim myself by acting as a kind of ersatz dungeon heart," Ami explained. "I'll have to remain in contact with the floor though, which means that I'll stay on board of the vessel for the entirety of the journey. My magic will be powering the fleet's machinery."

"Oh, so that's what the cables are for," Jered said, referring to the

slack tubes loosely tethering all five dirigibles together. He frowned. "I'm no expert, but I'm not sure tying together huge, flying objects moving at impressive speed is a good idea."

"Everything is rather slapdash and primitive right now, yes, but my first priority is getting into the air and moving," Ami admitted. "There's just no time to lose. Jadeite's glamours can cheat physics while I refine the design. I'll take my battle armour with its mobile treasury and a box of sapphires along, so I 'll be able to do on-the-fly adjustments," she explained.

At the moment, her vessels were little more than hollow shells attached to rigid-framed, helium-filled balloons fitted with magical propellers and a rudder. There was vast room for improvement indeed.

"I see," Jered nodded. "Still, I'm glad I'll be staying on solid ground, no offence intended. I just hope nobody attacks while you and the bots are away."

"So do I," Ami said. "I feel terrible taking all the most powerful troops and leaving you in an exposed position like this, but..."

"Oh, don't worry. We won't exactly be helpless," Cathy said, taking her boyfriend's arm. "We have a bunch of regular soldiers and traps now, and we can hook up the pilots to any new automatons finished while you are travelling. I'm sure we'll be able to at least hold the line until you return."

Ami nodded, grateful for the blonde's confidence. "If there really is an emergency, then Jadeite, Umbra, Tiger, and me are all able to teleport with a passenger," Ami said, "so don't hesitate to call for help."

"We'll keep that in mind," Jered said. "Are you really going to create a second dungeon heart before you leave? Generating a second weak spot while our defences are so weak seems imprudent."

"It's necessary," Ami said. "Securing the entirety of the Avatar Islands in one week, rather than three, is worth it. Actually, the new heart will probably be safer than this one. My enemies would need

to find out about its existence in the first place, and even then, they'd need to locate it before they could do something about it. Good luck tracking some new corruption *here*," she said, spreading her icy arms to gesture at the blasted wastelands spreading in every direction.

"Point," the wavy-haired man admitted. "Well, I guess we shouldn't delay you any longer, then. The others look about ready to depart." With a twist of his head, he indicated Mareki, who was sauntering past in her human guise, followed by a file of imps bent under the weight of the suitcases they were carrying.

On the Move

Originally on 2011-04-03T20:23:00

Ami stood on the peak of one of the craggy mountains in the eastern half of her realm, the transparent ice forming her current body almost invisible against the bare rock. Even from this elevated vantage point, she could not yet see any trace of the dark band of storm clouds that covered her claimed territory far to the west. She closed her eyes so she could better concentrate on her Keeper senses, and focused on feeling the ground. *I wonder why this works even though my eyelids are transparent,* she pondered bemusedly as her vision went dark. She let her attention sink through the dry, windswept ash and dust covering the surrounding wastelands, directing it deeper and deeper into the underground.

Her supernatural senses couldn't directly see the various layers of soil and rock, but instead perceived vibrations. Ami's brain interpreted the signals as sounds, and so she roamed the depths, listening for the trickling noises of water in underground crevices and the roaring of subterranean magma. A while later, the ice statue opened her red-glowing eyes and nodded in satisfaction. Her survey had confirmed that this area was geologically inert down to a depth of at least three kilometres. She wouldn't have to worry about magma flows, caverns, or shifting tectonics creating unplanned access points to the new dungeon she was planning.

Ami retrieved her Mercury computer and summoned her visor. She snapped her glowing fingers three times, adjusting her aim with each tremor her sensors detected deep underground. Her third weakened cave-in spell had gotten close enough to where she intended to place her new dungeon. Her probing complete, she prepared to cast the attack spell again. Black, flame-like tendrils sheathed the ice golem as Ami collected power for the fourth rock-crushing spell. She detonated the spell precisely two and a half kilometres underground, and was rewarded by the thin red curve moving over her palmtop's monitor spiking off the edges of the screen. With her Keeper powers, she reached deep into the

underground and took hold of some of the loose rubble she had just produced. A mental yank sent it into storage. Repeating the process, she quickly excavated a hollow large enough for an imp to swing a pick in, then delegated the digging work to a newly-created minion.

A few minutes later, Ami teleported down to the roughly-hewn cavern. The glow from her eyes was almost as bright as the light of the tiny lamp on the imp's helmet, and together, they barely managed to drive the shadows back to the furthest edges of the grotto. As soon as Ami arrived, she could feel droplets of melt water form on her exterior shell. Just as she had planned, the rock this deep underground was hotter than human body temperature, but not life-threateningly so. Feeling sorry for the sweat-drenched imp who had dug out the place in this suffocating environment, the young Keeper sent the magical creature back to the surface so she could cool off.

Ami scanned her surrounding once again to make sure she had not missed any potentially detrimental terrain features, and then concentrated on her treasury back at the iceberg's landing point. A thin strip of claimed territory, not much wider than a dirt trail and connected to Wemos' former territories, ended thirty kilometres to the west, well within the range of her transport power. A constant shower of gold coins jingled down on her frozen body as she moved them to the end of that claimed path and then used herself as target territory to get the precious metal into this cave. *I wouldn't recommend repeating this in my own body,* she mused when she noticed small chips and dents where the heavy pieces of yellow-glimmering currency struck her.

It didn't take too long for the teenager to fill the bottom of the room with the funds she had set aside for the creation of her new dungeon heart. She glanced down at her left wrist, where the warding armband would be glittering if someone was currently scrying on her. Finding the greenish disc inert, she nodded in satisfaction. Using her Keeper sight, she quickly located Tiger in the library. The youma was glamoured to look like her, complete with crimson-glowing eyes, and was studying a spellbook under the stern and vigilant gaze of Jadeite. So far, the decoy seemed to keep curious onlookers distracted well enough. Ami called up the schematics of

her modified dungeon heart, re-reading the words for the spell a final time, and stepped over jingling gold coins into the centre of the cave. She didn't feel as nervous as the first time she had created a dungeon heart, but retained a healthy respect for the meticulous precision that the task required. With only the tiniest bit of hesitation, she spread her arms and gathered her magic. It was time to begin.

Far away, power hummed through Ami's existing dungeon hearts as she started her chant. Each syllable of her long incantation coaxed the remote artefacts through a sequence of complex instructions, helping her to give the new dungeon heart form. Underneath the ice statue's feet, the gold liquefied into a cool, white-glowing mass that gathered in a dome-like blob before her. A vast network of reddish veins glowed within Ami's frozen body as magic passed through it, but she couldn't see it as she was concentration fully on her arcane labour. Her changes to the way the dungeon heart handled corruption would result in changes to its appearance, she knew.

As predicted by her calculations, the dais that grew from the ground lacked stairs and resembled the base of a pyramid whose top had been cut off. She also had expected the four pillars surrounding regular dungeon hearts to lean toward the centre and form horizontal connections with each other at the top, similar to what the superstructure of the organic hearts looked like. Within the frame formed by the interconnected columns, lightning flared, and a dark ripple blossomed in the empty space at its centre.

This was the critical part, Ami knew, and banished all distractions from her mind. She felt relief when a crystalline eggshell formed around the distortion, slowly growing in size and volume as it gobbled up the liquefied gold that rose to meet it. However, the usual three golden statues of kneeling trolls that were supposed to carry the huge central orb on their back failed to form. Instead, the tall sphere rested on a stem that flowed like molten wax, unwilling to settle into a final form even though Ami was already approaching the final sentences of the incantation. The ruby-coloured vines slithering up along the gilded surface of the columns, glittering as if red blood was rushing through them, had not shown up in any of Ami's models either. Before she could really worry about it, she felt an irresistible pull drag her out of her current body and into the dark orb. Inside,

she waited out the final phase of the construction process, during which the new artefact properly bonded with her.

Golden bands slid in place on top of the orb, signalling the end of the attuning procedure. Even if they hadn't, the ice golem remembering its imp-based origins and starting to claim the cavern would have tipped Ami off to the successful conclusion of her efforts.

"Why is it red?" the teenage Keeper wondered when the first rumbling heartbeat made the rock tremble, accompanied by a fiery orange pulse from the new dungeon heart. She appeared before the artefact, giving it a once-over. The central stalk on which the pulsating orb rested still hadn't settled on a final shape, and Ami was starting to wonder if it ever would. Covered in twisted, almost baroque decorations, the artefact bore a disturbing resemblance to the organic dungeon heart type. A hasty check with Ami's visor dispelled her awful suspicion that the dark gods had interfered in some way. From what she could tell, the changes was purely cosmetic. Manifestations of the corruption effect, now that she had loosened some of its restraints, perhaps?

She briefly swept her gaze over the walls that her golem was claiming, taking in the familiar frost patterns that had appeared. Larger and much more dominant than she was used to, they actually deformed the underlying walls and crystallised into sharp-edged protrusions of amethyst-coloured quartz. *I'll need to keep an eye on this - from a safe distance,* Ami decided. If she had made a mistake in the corruption-regulating mechanism somewhere, then she didn't need to find out by it twisting her own body. She had to hurry and get her fleet into the air, anyway, and now that the new heart was beating steadily, she could expand its dungeon from wherever she chose to.

On board of Ami's flagship, the young Keeper sat on a seat grown straight from the claimed floor. She kept one hand on the many-spoked steering wheel in front of her, over which she could look down at the cluttered cargo hold. Three crystal balls flanked her to her left and right, standing on separate pedestals. "Yes, Torian, I am, in fact, aware that this will keep you busy for most of the two days it will take me to get to our target. Do this well, and I'll let you have the two following days off," she addressed one of the glowing

spheres.

The short-bearded face of the warlock within the curved glass brighten a bit. "Very well, your Majesty. Do you want me to grind up a particular imp?"

Ami shook her head. "I have already prepared one of the corpses my vampires fed on. Careful, I'm going to send it over now."

A large bucket filled with a greyish, blood-soaked mass appeared before him. Torian jumped backwards, pressing his hands tightly against his robes to keep the cloth from fluttering into the mess. He grimaced as the smell of the mulched imp corpse hit him. "That's it? All right. I'll prepare the tracking spell on it."

On the airship, Ami nodded. "Good. Umbra and the Beastmaster will deal with the rest. You just keep the maps updated if anything starts moving."

"Very well, my Empress."

Ami withdrew her Keeper sight from his workshops when the door flew open and a leather-clad goblin entered, staggering under the weight of a large cage stuffed with squeaking rats. She didn't need to supervise the rats being painted with the disgusting mass, although it might have proved amusing. She would get involved again when the time came for Umbra to teleport the little beasts to the Underworld. At that point, she would have to make the rats find and brush against the death cult's prisoners so some of the marked gunk would adhere to them. While Ami was fairly certain where the ritual would take place, she wanted to have warning in case the victims were being dragged to some other location.

"I have finished mapping the enemy portal locations to points on the surface world," a male voice spoke up to Ami's left.

"Thanks, Jadeite," Ami said, directing a smile at the dark general who had just appeared out of a column of purplish light. She looked down into the cargo hold, where several gas cylinders marked H2 stood separate from the much more numerous helium tanks. Intended as emergency fuel for the airship's machinery, the

hydrogen contained within the gas bottles could also detonate with enough force to damage a portal. The teenager felt a lot better now that she knew she could potentially stop prisoner transit and delay Crowned Death's ritual that way if she was flying to the wrong location. "I must commend you for the smooth ride."

"Parting the air before our vessels is child's play for one such as me," the curly haired blonde said, sounding pleased with the praise. "However, I do not need to do very much at all. These airships are fairing rather well on their own."

"I'm glad to hear it," Ami said. "I haven't gotten around to properly analysing their aerodynamic properties yet, since I'm still constructing traps in the new dungeon, but that's next on my list. Feel free to take a rest if you need one. According to my projections, we will arrive at our destination in around thirty-one hours, give or take six hours depending on wind conditions."

Jadeite inclined his head. "Good. I shall be well rested before the battle, then. What about your own body, though? While this" he gestured toward Ami's black-striped form," is a great way to keep Tiger from causing more trouble, even youma will eventually get tired."

"I'll switch with one of the ice golems later," Ami decided. "After what she pulled earlier, I want her to be too tired for mischief before I let go of the body."

"Understandable," Jadeite said, "I shall see you in the morning."

"Good night," Ami called out as the dark general teleported away. Once he was gone, she settled Tiger's body more comfortably on her throne and directed her thoughts back to the minutiae of managing her remote dungeons.

Ami was still at work making adjustments to her vessels when the first rays of the rising sun caressed the underside of her dirigibles. "Whoops, careful out there!" she called, though the imp that had just been blown off the rope bridge now connecting her flagship to

another vessel probably couldn't hear her.

Fortunately for the large-eyed minion, Ami caught her with her Keeper powers before she could plummet all the way down to the glittering waves below. The imp belly-flopped onto the bottom of the cabin and let out a pained squeak, but seemed otherwise unhurt.

Taking pity on the small creature, Ami fitted her with a security harness before she sent her back out onto the swinging bridge, which had so much slack that it sagged into an u-shape.

Her overall fluttering in the wind, the imp crawled back onto the swinging contraption. Reluctantly, she got to her feet and started the first steps of the terrain-claiming dance on the steep, unstable incline. To her total lack of surprise, she soon found herself dangling underneath the bridge, held only by her harness.

In hindsight, this might not have been one of my brightest ideas ever, Ami thought as she watched her servant struggle to climb back onto the bridge. *Perhaps this body is finally getting too tired?*

"Does that mean you are done abusing my body now?" Tiger's voice in the back of Ami's mind commented.

"You don't get to complain after what you did," Ami shot back, irritated by the self-pity she could feel from the youma's mind. *"If I could trust you to behave reasonably, then I wouldn't have to do this!"*

"Being stuck in here with you without control is punishment enough," Tiger replied. *"Come on, let me go, I'll be good! I didn't even complain when you were thinking naughty thoughts about general Jadeite!"* she finished, sounding vaguely disgusted.

Ami felt her borrowed face heat up. *"Stay out of my head!"*

"I wouldn't even be able to listen to your thoughts if you had stayed out of mine! It's not as if I want to overhear that kind of thing!" Tiger shot back.

"Right." Ami rubbed her temples. *"Whatever possessed you to try and impersonate me, anyway? You had to know it would get you*

into trouble."

"I told you already, it seemed funny at the time," the youma muttered.

Tiger's voice and inflection were all correct, but Ami could feel the insincerity of the statement. Intrigued, she decided to probe deeper. *"Is that so? You cannot lie to me here, you know. Why did you really do it?"*

"You really want to know? Fine. Remember, you asked for this." The youma's emotions tasted bitter and angry, surprising Ami with their intensity. *"In short, you really, really piss me off!"*

"W-what?" Ami didn't believe she had done anything to deserve that level of hostility from the youma, who would still be stuck in Eternal Sleep if it wasn't for her. *"What is your problem?"* she directed a harsh thought at the cohabitant of her mind.

"You are the problem!" the youma shouted mentally. *"Just look at yourself! You have everything I could possibly wish for! Power! Loyal servants! Riches! Queen Metallia's favour! But are you happy about it? No! You endlessly feel sorry for yourself and never appreciate what you have! You don't even care about it! All you ever do is sit around worrying about getting home and protecting people!"*

"There are more important things than wealth and power!" Ami replied with conviction.

"That's easy for you to say! I didn't ask to have your memories shoved into my head! Do you know what it is like, to have all your dreams come true and then find out that it was all a lie? Whoops, sorry, it was all a mistake. Nothing is yours even though you remember it being yours! Instead, it all belongs to someone who spits on its value! Tough luck!" Being a mental voice, Tiger had no need to catch her breath as she ranted. *"You changed my body, changed my mind so that even thinking properly is a struggle, and then took everything from me!"* the youma accused.

Ami was a bit taken aback by the venom in her voice. She hadn't considered the situation from that perspective yet. Still, something

about the creature's accusations rang hollow despite the conviction in her words. Slightly unsettled, Ami replied *"While I'm sorry this happened to you, you know as well as I that it wasn't intentional. Besides,"* she rallied behind a point she remained completely certain about, *"that still doesn't give you the right to mess with my friends! What you did would have hurt them as well as me!"* To her surprise she felt a wave of misery from the youma's direction.

"Friends? The friends I remember? Your. Friends. I'm just a silly youma to them. Nothing but target practice!" Tiger replied, radiating bitterness.

"You- you are jealous?" Ami asked, blinking in surprise with the other's body. *"So since you can't have them, neither should I?"*

Tiger remained silent, which confirmed to Ami that she had hit the nail on the head.*"You are being silly,"* she chided the youma. *"Even if you have only parts of my memories, you should have seen enough to know they wouldn't reject you just because of what you are!"*

"I may have your memories, but I'm not you! I'm an entirely different person," Tiger protested. *"They wouldn't like me! I don't think like you do! Arrgh! I'm not even supposed to care about stuff like this! You ruined me!"* the youma complained, sounding both confused and frustrated.

"Ah, well..." Ami was at a loss about how to handle this. *"You could have spared us all some trouble if you had just talked about this first, but I see where you are coming from, and, if it's worth anything to you, I'm sorry about what happened to you. However, I need to know whether or not I can count on your cooperation during this operation. Do you really want to see all of these people die?"*

"... guess not." the clump of confused depression replied after a while. *"Fine, I'll help you out. Even though I don't know why. Annoying humans."*

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Interception

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"Damn it, Camilla! Stop nodding off already!" a fairy with short red hair snarled as she trapped her sister under her right arm with a quick lunge, preventing her from sliding off the flying carpet.

The youngest of the fairy sisters groaned, her roundish right cheek resting against the fabric she was pinned against. She raised one eyelid as if it was made of lead. "Too early. Want my hammock," she whined, half-asleep. Under different circumstances, Anise might have found the sight adorable. However, such behaviour only irritated her while racing at high speed over the moonlit ocean on a woven rectangle that lacked railings. The ruby-eyed woman wasn't even worried for the blonde's safety. If she dropped off, then she would start flying on instinct long before she could hit the dark waves below, like any falling fairy would. However, slowing down, circling around, and picking her up would cost valuable time that the Elite Full-Faery Aerial Recon Force didn't have.

"I'll handle this," the calm tone of the fae sitting cross-legged in the foremost position interrupted. Anise's indigo-haired eldest sibling looked back over her shoulder and put a slender hand onto Camilla's hair, as if to pet her.

An instant later, the blonde's indignant screech echoed through the air. The girl's now thoroughly drenched head jerked upwards. With her yellow eyes wide-open, she blinked at her eldest sister's back. "Dandel! You didn't have to use ice water!" Camilla sputtered, sounding betrayed.

"Thank you, Dandel," the fiery-haired fae wearing two short swords at her belt said with a smug grin, pleased with the blonde's state of enforced wakefulness.

"So, what's going on, anyway?" the round-faced fairy asked, shivering as the cold night air rushed through her wet tresses. "Everything between being shaken awake and ushered onto this

carpet is kind of blurry to me," she admitted.

"Oh, is that why you went on a mission in your nightshirt?" A voice from above asked.

"Eep!" Camilla looked down at her herself and found that she was wearing the same white, swimsuit-like uniform as her sisters. She shot a glare up at the orange-haired girl grinning down at her from a second flying carpet. "Roselle! No fair teasing me like that! Light, I hate night missions," she sighed.

"To answer your question from earlier," Dandel spoke up, keeping her tone professional, "Command sensed something escaping from the Avatar Islands and heading straight toward the west at great speed." The indigo-haired fairy narrowed her turquoise eyes at a point in the distance. "Initial scrying could not locate the target in this darkness. Given its speed and magical signature, it's probably too small to spot with scrying alone."

Anise leaned forward. "Thus, it's time for some good old-fashioned manual reconnaissance."

"Right. Couldn't they have sent someone else to do it?" Camilla whined, trying to pat her hair dry.

"Well, it's kind of our job," Roselle teased from the other carpet.

"Besides, since we are almost certainly dealing with Empress Mercury here, we are the obvious team for this task," Dandel continued.

"Huh?"

"We got out of our encounters with her alive and unharmed so far," the violet-haired fairy elaborated, "so our superiors are hoping that the trend holds."

"Empress Mercury," the blonde muttered to herself, as if contemplating the meaning of the title. Her lips pursed into a pout, and she crossed her arms. "She should have picked a better time for staging an escape!"

Anise was glad to hear that her sister didn't sound as intimidated by the Keeper as her list of exploits could merit. Then again, they had already fought her before - twice - and gotten away fine. A small part of the redhead's brain insisted that this was all due to Mercury being rather less bloodthirsty than the regular Keepers, but she pushed that thought aside. "Well then, start looking already. Even if she rendered whatever vessel she's using invisible, we should still be able to sense the magic used to hide it." She waved up at the other flying carpet. "Hey, Melissa! Have you spotted anything yet?"

"I cannot feel anything unnatural in the depths," the blue-haired fairy replied in a trance-like voice, never opening her eyes.

"Ah well, keep looking. Personally, I think the target is going to be flying. Nothing's going to be swimming that fast."

For a while, all was quiet as the fairies let their gazes sweep over the horizon, where the sea's calm surface reflected the crescent moon.

"Are you sure we are in the right place?" Anise spoke up, causing Dandel in front of her to wince.

"Please, not so loud when I'm augmenting my hearing," the indigo-haired fae protested in a hushed whisper.

"Perfectly so," Tilia called out from the other carpet. The green-haired fairy raised a sextant. "If you don't believe me, just check the stars yourself!" she said, pointing up at the sky. Suddenly, she froze, and a frown appeared on her brow. "Are those stars winking out?"

Anise followed her sister's gaze, and her jaw dropped. A wedge-shaped formation of five enormous shadows with the general contours of a shark were gliding noiselessly along the sky, almost invisible where they didn't blot out the starlight. The paling redhead closed her mouth with an audible click. "Th-they are each bigger than the Emperor's Fist!" she sputtered, referring to the crown jewel of the Shining Concord's navy.

"Y-Yeah, they are huge!" Camilla declared, once she got over her stunned surprise. "How's that Keeper keeping them aloft?" She

wondered. "I can't sense any flying spells!"

"More importantly," Dandel said in a sombre voice, "that's not a mere escape, that's a full-blown invasion force. *Oracle!*"

Summoned by the woman's words, the ghostly image of a long-bearded man sitting in the lotus position appeared in the air between the flying carpets, easily keeping pace with them. The silvery lines making up the bald sage's contours spread out around him for a short distance before fading, surrounding him with sets of chimes and hanging bells. "Yes?" he asked simply, fixating the eldest of the sisters with his stare.

"We have located the targets," Dandel reported, and pointed at the sky. "As you can see, they are much larger than we were led to believe. Troop carriers, potentially." The bald man followed the direction she was pointing up, and she saw his eyebrows rise in surprise.

"Most unexpected. It is worrisome that she can cloak that much magic from my sight." A gnarled hand appeared from the wide sleeves of his robe, holding a thin pendulum. He glanced at it expectantly, and his brow creased when it remained inert even after he waited for several seconds. "Most worrisome indeed. You are to keep an eye on those vessels from a safe distance. I must warn the nations that are in the path of this new threat."

"But we didn't pack for a long-term mission!" Anise objected.

"So fish and create your own water," the echoing voice of the oracle said, unimpressed. "It is important that we do not lose track of this force again."

"Estimed Oracle," Dandel said, "the course of that fleet will take it straight through the Dreadfog Island exclusion zone. Can we risk that?"

"I imagine that whatever makes ships disappear without a trace will direct its attentions toward the dark empress's fleet long before it even notices you," the oracle replied. "Should her vessels disappear too, you are to return. Farewell." Chimes rang in the background as

his image dissolved into the silver dust that hung in the air for a moment, not unlike the golden glitter.

"Dreadfog Island, eh?" Anise said into the ensuing silence. She had heard the stories, of course.

The fairies looked at each other unhappily.

"No sleep for me," Camilla whined.

When using Keeper sight, Ami could almost forget that she was sitting in her flagship's command seat, possessing a golem body clad in her senshi uniform. Her current point of view was inside a new, amphitheatre-like room she had dug out in her home dungeon. Over the previous day, she had made her warlocks scry on the enemy island using a systematic search pattern. Starting at the top of the highest mountain and going deeper layer by layer, they had explored every nook and cranny of the surface and of the dungeon below. Ami had recorded their efforts on her Mercury computer and painstakingly compiled them into a single, three-dimensional map. This had allowed her to create a glass model of the site the death cultists had chosen for their ritual. The vast sculpture of coloured glass and hollow spaces that had taken form through her Keeper powers now occupied the entirety of the circular arena below.

"I still can hardly believe that a Keeper would be so blatant," Cathy's voice came from one of the six crystal balls resting in front of Ami's seat. The swordswoman was standing on the highest of the tiers that circled the glass map, her arms akimbo. Due to the depths of the tunnels represented by the map, her face was level with the surface of the island, and its most defining feature.

Glittering under the harsh glare of the spotlights, a mountain carved into the shape of a leering skull grinned at the blonde.

"It is rather unusual," Ami replied, "but it might be a corruption effect. He does worship a death god. In any case, he does not seem to have any neighbours who could complain about it."

Ami's attempt at levity had little effect on the swordswoman, but a few of the warlocks seated below, staring into crystal balls, started snickered.

"You, stop eavesdropping and get back to doing your job!" Cathy shouted at the loudest of the sycophants. For good measure, she bounced a piece of scrunched-up paper from her desk off the back of his head. It rebounded off his high, violet collar, and found its way down his robes.

The goblins seated on the ranks below the warlocks approved, snickering and pointing their fingers as the unfortunate target twisted and turned in an attempt to fish the itchy bit of paper back out again.

"Yes, Commander! It won't happen again, Commander!" The chastised shouted, ducking his head. His hands started moving more quickly as he performed low-powered spells that pushed figurines of skeletal warriors through the glass tunnels. Soon, their positions corresponded to those of the undead he was watching in the scrying device before him.

Cathy smirked, visibly pleased with her aim. "Anyway, have you figured out which one is the real one yet?" she asked, waving her hand toward the glass map. Five reddish knots surrounded by stone arches indicated the potential positions of the enemy dungeon heart, deep within the tunnels.

"Just about," Ami said. "I'm waiting for additional data from my spy."

"Well, tell her to hurry. It's going to take some time to drill the attack plan into the heads of that sorry bunch." The swordswomen pointed at the goblins, who were, according to temper and social standing, hitting each other, trying not to get hit, and in some cases, taste-testing their own earwax.

As if responding to the sense of urgency in Cathy's words, a lithe figure appeared in the air in front of Ami, surrounded by a burst of greenish motes. The fuku-clad ice statue let out a happy squeal and unfolded from its somersault, managing a perfect landing on the ground.

This particular statue was one of a set of five that Ami had created a while ago and then empowered with her own senshi transformation. The senshi figured that having five well-trained and powerful golems would be more effective than just creating a batch of replaceable cannon fodder. However, so far only the simulacrum in front of her had managed to acquire the teleportation ability of the imps it was based on. Learning that trick had been its only task for most of its existence.

Ami was rather glad she had thought of that experiment. It might just save innocent lives now.

Without the need for verbal communication, the golem touched its right ear, deactivated its visor and stepped closer to her red-eyed double. With a deft motion, it removed its earrings and dropped them into Ami's open palm.

The young Keeper wasted no time and replaced her own earrings with the jewellery she had just received. She opened her Mercury computer and took a look at the footage of pale, transparent figures floating above the foggy shore. She ignored the shaking of the camera, which was due to the golem bobbing up and down on the waves as it scanned the enemy stronghold, and focused on the sensor information instead. A few keystrokes to enhance the minion links, and she could start triangulating their common point of origin. With a bright smile, she looked up at the crystal ball displaying Cathy's face. "That one!"

At the same time, four of the five dungeon heart models in the glass map shattered, leaving only the most central and deepest one.

"Excellent," the blonde replied with an answering grin. She turned to the goblin pilots lounging in their seats. "You heard the Empress! Start memorising the routes leading to the target!"

The unruly mob of green-skinned creatures calmed down and started looking at the glass construct attentively, while one of the warlocks helpfully used his magic to colour the relevant tunnels and rooms in a bright greenish tone.

"How many of them do you want for that assault?" Cathy asked into

her own crystal ball.

"More than half," Ami said without hesitation, since she had been pondering tactics for most of the journey. "I'd prefer focusing completely on the temple, really, but an active Keeper opposing us needs to be dealt with as soon as possible." She sighed as her Keeper sight focused on the large black blotch in the construct that denoted an absence of scrying information. "I'm glad Clairmonte is using the organic heart version. At least I won't have to worry about his magic striking the airships while I approach."

"Speaking of which, the death priests have started moving prisoners to the island," Cathy said with a sideways glance at the map that kept being updated.

Ami quickly consulted the position of the sun for reassurance. The orange disc her airships were racing towards hung low over the horizon, where the island had just become visible as a blurry spot in the distance. It would still take a bit more than an hour until the sun disappeared behind the red-stained waves. "So they want all the sacrifices present before they commit to the ritual," Ami pondered, sliding one finger across her frozen chin.

"Just as you predicted. They are evidently worried about someone cutting the supply lines while they conduct the ceremony."

"And moving around eight thousand prisoners will take some time," Ami agreed. A chill went through her body at the thought of their survival resting entirely in her hands. "That makes taking down the Keeper first even more important. I won't be able to keep the priests from massacring them if Clairmont can just transport them into the temple."

"You'll just have to keep the bastard too busy defending himself to spare attention for the ritual," Cathy commented. "In fact-"

A column of darkness materialised in front of Ami, causing the fuku-clad simulacrum already there to jump aside with a startled squeal. The shadows collapsed in on themselves, revealing Umbra's dark-robed silhouette. Down on one knee, the youma reported "Your Majesty, excuse me for interrupting, but we are being intercepted!"

"Already?" Ami's grip on the armrests of her chair tightened. *I had rather hoped we wouldn't be noticed this early.*

"Pilots, to battle stations!" Cathy's voice came from the glowing orb in front the young Keeper.

"Angle of approach?" Ami asked and transported herself to the front of the cabin, where she stared out through one of the windows and scanned the ocean ahead.

"Ahead and below," Umbra reported, prompting the crimson-eyed girl to look down at the surface of the sea over a kilometre below.

Ami narrowed her eyes as she searched for the enemy. Behind her, she could hear metallic scraping noises as the reaperbots came alive in the cargo hold and sat up. At first she almost didn't notice the white spectres rising like foam bubbles from the water below. Ghosts. After facing Zarekos' near endless hordes, the cloud of howling, murderous faces didn't impress her nearly as much as it could have. Still, she wasn't safely hidden away inside a sturdy iceberg this time. *Jadeite, Mareki, Umbra! We are under attack! Get ready to repel ghosts! Protect one ship each! I'll release Rabixtrel on the remaining one!* She transmitted mentally. "Tiger, you are with me. I need you to create hard stone boulders."

The tiger-striped youma lying on top of a stack of folded-up fabric sat up. "So you basically want to chuck rocks at them?" She shrugged, which did interesting things to her generous chest. "Suit yourself." She held out her hand, and a stalagmite-like column of jagged marble rose from the floor with a grinding noise.

"Something like that. They are very resistant to direct magical attacks," Ami explained. She moved her Keeper sight to the rightmost dirigible, where a red and horned figure was suspended from the ceiling by a chain looped around his waist.

The horned reaper's legs pumped as if he was on solid ground, and from time, he swung his scythe and let out a contented growl. He suddenly went still when the reaperbot control headset and visor disappeared from his brow, effectively disconnecting him from his entertainment system and giving him a free few of the airship's

cabin.

"Rabixtrel, kill any undead you can reach!" Ami ordered telepathically as she lowered him to the ground and the chain settled around his hooves with a rattle. Since he would be naturally inclined to do just that, she returned her attention back to the attackers.

The spread-out swarm of a hundred or so ghosts was ascending rapidly, glowing like fireflies with the onset of twilight. Easily-spotted targets.

Ami hesitated and activated her visor, not wanting to be taken by surprise again. To her relief, the additional sensor data didn't reveal any invisible or illusionary foes, though it did hint at more activity below the waves. Quickly, she transported one of the stone columns Tiger had made down into the group of approaching spectres and immediately followed it up with a fireball that turned the harmless rock into an expanding blast of whistling shrapnel. The sharp-edged shards thinned out the ghosts a bit, but less so than Ami would have liked. *This would probably work better if I had real rock,* she pondered. Oh well, it wasn't as if she had left her airships unarmed.

She turned away from the window and shot a glance at a bunch of imps just waiting in the main cargo hold. Across her vessels, several of the tiny minions disappeared into hatches in the bottom of the cabin, and Ami could hear metallic rummaging and grinding noises start up below. Cannons weren't unknown in this world, and so she had no qualms about making some for herself. However, she doubted that any other warships mounted theirs on turrets. "Hold your fire," she ordered even as the weapons swivelled downwards.

For now, she would conserve ammo. She had a considerably more low-tech solution to this problem, even if it was more labour-intensive. Outside of the airship, she formed her Keeper hand, flexing its watery fingers. *I wonder if others think that this is a special ability granted by my dark god?* she mused as the hand closed around the handle of an enormous flyswatter attached to the side of the gondola. In a way, they would even be right. She wouldn't be able to do this without Jadeite's instructions for using telekinesis.

With a flick of the giant wrist, the grid of steel rods whistled through

the swarm of ghosts. In its wake remained only rapidly-dispersing chunks of ghosts the same sizes as the apertures in the grille.

Ami allowed herself a smile as she brought her weapon around for another go through the scattering attackers. Half of the spectres were gone already. At the rate she was destroying them, none would even make it to her fleet.

A straight ray of darkness that looked like inverted lightning shot up from the sea below and cut through the grip of her flyswatter, sending its head spinning downwards in an uncontrolled fall. Ami's eyes widened even as her visor pinpointed the source of the attack. She spotted a miraculously dry figure wearing a fluttering black robe adorned with animal skulls on the shoulders, and a similar clasp at the neck. It slowly rose from the frothing sea, standing on a wooden rod that pierced the waves from below and rose higher and higher. A tattered flag came into sight next, its colours long dulled into a dirty grey by exposure to salt water. In the death priest's raised right hand, he held a spiralling bone rod with three prongs, still aimed at the sky.

Ami struck immediately. Her water hand appeared behind the cloaked enemy without traversing the intervening distance, but before it could pulverise the undead creature, a pulse of force blasted it into a fine mist that glittered with rainbows in the light of the setting sun. That had come from below, the teenager realised.

The half-rotten mast the priest was standing on burst into greenish St. Elmo's fire and kept rising. Surprised, Ami watched as an algae-covered wreck with decayed sails surfaced from the ocean. Salt water ran backwards over its deck, away from the prow pointed at the sky at an angle, and sloshed past the skeletal legs of the crew holding onto the railing. Behind the steering wheel of the ghost ship, she spotted another of the death priests, this one more broad-shouldered and in a robe of deeper purple.

"Open fire!" Ami, commanded even as she transported her golem body into her waiting suit of battle armour. One of the sapphires studding its shoulders disappeared with a plop, and she felt a wave of magical power rush into her. Without hesitation, she hurled it at the wreck emerging from the sea.

With a loud roar, a white-hot fireball covered the ruined galleon, flattening the surrounding waves with the force of the explosion. Flames licked outwards like petals of a blossom as the detonation pressed against a dome of purplish force that surrounded the dripping vessel.

Ami scowled as she detected two more of the gaunt figures standing on the ship's bow, surrounded by a violet glow and crossing their battle staves of Calarine.

Didn't Torian say those things were supposed to be rare?" Ami thought as the two separated and dropped their shielding spell. Her imps weren't the most accurate gunners, she noted when small columns of water rose upwards around the mobile wreck. Which had now lost contact with the sea entirely and was ascending rapidly. *It's a lot faster in the air!* she realised and sent Keeper lightning after it.

To her chagrin, one of the skeletal priests waved his staff and bent the blinding arcs of electricity around the algae-trailing vessel.

Ami's eyes widened suddenly. "Tiger, more rocks!" she shouted, then grabbed one of the existing stone columns and threw it at the blindingly-white fireball that was rocketing toward her flagship, fired by the figure on the ship's crow's nest. The resulting blast sent the remaining ghosts careening aside like leaves in the wind. "Shabon Spray!"

At the speed her fleet and the wreck were racing toward the island, the cloud of fog was little more than a momentary distraction, soon left behind. It did give her a momentary breather, though.

A beam of blackness shot from the mist and speared one of her airships through the hull before coming out the other side. Nothing to be concerned about, the lifting gas was not under pressure, but she really needed to counterattack properly. Perhaps she could wear them down? Her Keeper hand appeared in front of the glowing enemy vessel, a spark of light forming at its fingertips. Lightning lashed at the water-soaked wreck, only to encounter a purplish barrier raised by one of the priests. Ami grit her teeth, and black tendrils licked around her suit of armour as she channelled Metallia's power into her attack too.

The barrier retreated, but a second death cultist teleported to the first's side, raising his staff and reinforcing the shield. Their hollow-eyed skulls glared impassively at the sun-bright spot bearing down on them, held at bay only by their magical power. Ami's eyes narrowed, and another jewel disappeared from her shoulder. The lightning increased in brightness yet again. It surged forward, and in an instant, the barrier buckled and burst. Before the undead could react, the torrent washed over them, cutting them in half as Ami swung the arcing electricity sideways like a whip.

Steam rose from blistering wood as the vessel lost its mast. The death priest behind the steering wheel disappeared in a cloud of darkness before Ami's spell could touch him. Immediately, the vessel started dropping like a rock, leaving the rest of its skeleton crew to hold on desperately to the railings and mussel-covered ropes.

Ami let out a whoop of joy, even though the remaining death priests reappeared and stopped the galleon's fall. Wood groaned and skeleton soldiers went flying across the deck from the sudden jerk, and a large piece of the brittle keel dropped out.

"Um, you are leaking," Tiger pointed out, gesturing at the pool of melt water Ami was standing in.

The Keeper blinked and looked down at the puddle that quivered when the dirigible's cannons discharged with a loud boom. "Right. Hard on the body, I'll remember that."

Outside, the enemy ship had gained altitude enough to bring its own rust-encrusted cannons to bear. Skeletons clad in rags darted across the slimy planks, loading ammunition into the metal pipes.

Ami made another grab for the enemy mages with her Keeper hand, but like before, a ripple of disruptive force scattered it before it could do any damage.

A quick Shabon Spray Freezing from storage, transported directly into the enemy's ribcage, materialised prematurely, but at least it forced the enemy to throw himself aside. A few cannonballs burrowed into the deck next to the sprawled out death priest, raining

wet splinters down on him.

Just as Ami was about to finish him off with more lightning, the cabin of her vessel shook hard enough to throw her off her feet, and wind howled in through the new hole in its front, carrying metal debris along.

"More of them," Tiger shouted at the same time as Ami spotted the other three sailing ships diving at her fleet out of the setting sun.

"Darn it!" the young Keeper jumped back to her feet and launched a hasty Shabon Spray to create a wall of fog between her airships and the incoming vessel. This was bad. Her visor was detecting more of the undead priests on the new hostile contacts. Only four of them had already been trouble. From below and to the left, she heard a series of faint pops as the cannons on the vessel she had damaged fired. The approaching broadside swerved upwards, no doubt guided by the spells of the evil mages, and slammed unerringly into the envelope of two of her ships. Rather than exploding, however, they went right through and emerged on the other side.

I'll need to fix the punctures later, Ami noted, staring with trepidation at the warnings flashing across her visor. Energy was arcing between the three approaching wrecks in an inverted triangle, channelled by a pair of the staff-wielding figures at their prows. With barely a pause, she unleashed short bursts of lightning at the charging opponents, not at all surprised when they slammed into a purplish barrier.

Jadeite, guide our shots as they do theirs! Ami ordered mentally, too pressed for time to be polite about it. Five ice golems appeared before her for the time it took her to blink, and then they found themselves raining down on the enemy vessels. Ami could already see the swirling magic around the flying wrecks concentrate into a more powerful ball when the golems landed on the three separate ships.

Three of them slammed into shields before they could make it onto the deck, and the other two immediately disappeared under a dogpile of sabre-wielding skeletons. However, one of the ice golems managed to point its fingers at one of the casting priests even as the

stained weapons hacked its icy chain mail apart. With five pops, the icicle like fingers detached and thudded into the back of the chanting skeleton's hooded skull. It toppled forward like a marionette with its strings cut, releasing the energy it had helped gather.

Unfortunately for Ami, the other priests proved to be able to handle the sudden imbalance. With a simultaneous wave of their staves, their spell flashed blue and hurled itself forward as a vortex of gale-like forces that hit Ami's fleet like a fist. Her cabin rocked around her and filled with tumbling reaperbots, gas bottles, and airship maintenance gear as the dirigibles spun out of control. Ami threw herself out of the path of a crate that came bearing down on her and tried to stop the rotating motions of her airships. Tethered together by hollow tubes her imps had used to claim each of them as her territory, they couldn't be scattered too far from each other. Unfortunately, the violent tugs still resulted in disorienting jerks, abrupt changes of direction, and screams of strained metal.

Ami crawled over a fallen reaperbot to regain her footing and ducked her head when a series of loud bangs sounded outside. The enemy ships were among her fleet! They'd be much more manoeuvrable than her own tied-together behemoths, so she needed to do something, fast!

"Mercury, behind you!" Tiger shouted, her horned head peaking out from underneath one of the rolls of fabric that had fallen on top of her.

Ami whirled around to see one of the death priests levelling his battle staff at her, still surrounded by the black flicker of a recent teleport. She reacted instantly and transported herself behind him. Instincts honed in preparation for fighting a reaper in an arena duel made her draw her sword, and the creature's head and arm went flying under her augmented strike. Under her helmet, she let out a sigh of relief as the creature collapsed, only to be jostled again when a patch of metal on the left side of the cabin turned red-hot. "Darn it!" She turned away from the corpse and unleashed a barrage of lightning at the vessel that had pulled up at her side - it looked like a Shining Concord warship that had sunk a long time ago, if memory of the one she had seen served her right. The spells were intercepted, but at least it kept the priests busy while her own

cannons returned fire.

One of the six crystal balls placed around the command chair suddenly lit up."You are doing it wrong! You have to go for the skulls!"

Ami needed a moment to place the haughty female voice. When she recognised it, she felt a hint of apprehension. "What? Keeper Midori?" she blurted out when she could spare a moment to look at the red-eyed face of the elven princess Julia in the glowing sphere. Was she in on Crowned Death's plan?

"Killing Crowned Death's priests. You have to destroy their skulls, including those they are wearing," the other Keeper instructed. "Better finish the one over there off before he gets up as if nothing happened."

"Why are you telling me this?" Ami asked suspiciously, most of her attention caught up in the raging battle. If the other Keeper was trying to trick her, she couldn't see how. She was already dedicating her efforts to swatting down those undead magic users. Argh, there were skeleton pirates swinging over to her ships using grappling hooks now! Did that one have a skeletal parrot on its shoulder? Behind her, she could hear cracking noises as a pair of reaperbots stomped the remains of the death priest into dust. Good, reliable Cathy!

"Because we are going to discuss how you are going to repay me for that information later," Midori answered. "In the meanwhile, keep wiping out as much of Crowned Death's high clergy as you can for me, yes?" The smooth-skinned woman in the crystal ball winked and waved before the orb went dark.

Ami was too busy interposing Tiger's rock between her ships and overpowered magical attacks to reply. Something needed to change, and soon! Her airships were taking more than cosmetic damage here! Hmm, it looked as if the two attacking casters on the closest warship were winding up for another big spell. She needed something they wouldn't know how to defend against. Perhaps... yes!

With her keeper powers, she reached inside one of the bottles of liquid hydrogen lying in a jumbled mess between the more numerous helium cylinders and flung the super-cooled liquid at the enemy vessel. Immediately, it splashed down on the casting figures, not inconveniencing them much aside from obstructing their vision with a thick, white fog. An instant later, they lost their footing as the wet deck frosted over.

Not one to miss an opportunity, Ami quickly set fire to the expanding cloud of gas. The darting flame that ripped off the entire deck with a loud hiss warmed her heart.

The steaming vessel flipped over and started spiralling down, taking one threat out of the equation.

She let her attention quickly flick over her other vessels so she could reassign her priorities. Rabixtrel was chasing boarders around with a huge grin. Mareki and Umbra were darting through the air outside, cutting off grappling hooks and taking pot-shots at the enemy ships. Propellers missing on ship number three, number four losing gas rapidly.

More explosions filled the air as both sides exchanged fire. Where was Jadeite? Ami felt a moment of panic when she couldn't find him on any of her dirigibles. Where- Oh!

One of the enemy flying ships, this one a thick-bellied galleon with two masts, seemed to be having trouble. An ostentatiously-robed priest tugged at the steering wheel of the vessel in a way that expressed, with body language alone, that he had no idea what was going on and didn't like it one bit. Neither did the captain of the flying wreck he was on a collision course with, and which was leaning sideways as it took evasive measures.

On the underside of the out-of-control vessel, Jadeite stood upside-down with his arms crossed, breaking into a maniacal laugh as he adjusted the ship's course the final few degrees that aimed it straight at the keel of its companion vessel. His form wavered and disappeared just before the two wooden wrecks crashed into each other, disintegrating into a cloud of pulped wood, and falling planks..

One enemy ship remaining. Ami quickly focused her attention back on the first vessel, the one whose crew she had crippled earlier. She trusted her warriors to handle whatever ghosts and boarders had managed to make it onto her airships, and could now take the time to simply overpower the death priests' shield again.

Lightning flared through the twilight, but this time, the enemy magic users abandoned ship, rather than daring to pit their strength against that of Empress Mercury for the second time. Without them, the sailing vessel succumbed to gravity and quickly became smaller in the distance.

Ami watched the vessel plummet, her spirit lifted by the victory. She was therefore in the perfect position to see two long, snake-like things break through the surface of the sea and catch the wreck. Even as her jaw dropped, the two sucker-covered tendrils reared back.

"You've got to be kidding me!" Ami shouted, her eyes as wide as saucers when the tentacles whipped forward and derelict vessel grew rapidly larger and larger in her view. "Tiger! Out, now!"

Another sapphire on her armour's shoulder dissolved into gold to fuel Ami's desperate counter-strike.

Her fireball blew the mass of compressed wood apart, but its momentum kept it going. Rather than ripping a giant hole into the hull, a rain of shards tore through the flagship's fabric like a shotgun blast, causing it to lose gas and altitude rapidly.

"Oh no! JADEITE!"

"On it!" the dark general appeared above the damaged airship, looking tiny against its enormous bulk. The whistle of helium escaping into the atmosphere stopped as his power sealed in the lifting gas.

Ami did what she could with her repair supplies, throwing them to her imps so they could patch the biggest holes while she kept an eye on the creature below.

A bulbous head rose from the depths, its pale skin mottled and brittle. Milky, unmoving eyes larger than Ami appeared above the water line.

Giant octopus. No, giant octopus zombie! Ami realised a moment before its vile stench assaulted her nose. The creature's head alone was about as big as the ships she had fought earlier!

Eight dark-robed figure with bone-armoured shoulders stood distributed over the pale, undead bulk of the behemoth as greenish fire flared around it. To Ami's horror, it took to the sky just like the wrecks before, flailing its grasping tentacles wildly. The death priests were back for round two.

Her visor informed her that no less than four of the undead clergymen were maintaining the defensive spells this time, but it took the combined efforts of the other four to keep their abomination airborne.

It doesn't have ranged attacks, Ami thought, *Unfortunately, it's faster than my battered ships, so it doesn't need any with those tentacles!* What could she do?

An attempt to simply overcome the augmented power of the four undead defenders met with failure and allowed the monstrosity to draw closer. A more dispersed pattern of fireballs and lightning bolts she threw at the creature were swatted down by the experienced magic users riding on its back.

Could she send the reaperbots after the skeletons? No, they couldn't survive a drop from this height, and she needed them for the real assault.

With a purplish flash, Jadeite appeared at Ami's side. Like her, he was staring at the incoming monstrosity extending its grasping tentacles toward the ship. "Any idea-" he squaked, then stopped, mortified by the sound of his high-pitched, helium-altered voice.

The armoured ice golem had her computer out and was typing away furiously. "So far, the only half-way viable plan I can come up with is roasting it. I'll need you to keep the air windless in the area between

the fleet and the monster," she said in a business-like tone of voice.

"Tiring," the dark general squeaked sourly, but nodded.

"It's only for a short time," Ami promised, looking apologetic. She didn't like exhausting one of her greatest assets before the real invasion, but if it was the only way to get there in the first place, then she had no choice. As soon as the grey-uniformed general's eyes started shining bright with power, she started tossing her remaining cylinders of hydrogen into the space between her and the octopus that crushed them, releasing the gas into the atmosphere.

As her calculations predicted, the white fog cloud caused by the intense cold billowed toward the giant zombie and its riders, enveloping them. A quick spark, and the flammable gas turned into a blazing inferno, shaking the airships with the thunderous violence of its ignition.

"You can release the spell now," she told Jadeite in a small voice. The curly-haired blonde gratefully let himself sink to the floor, staring into the conflagration.

The nauseating smell of cooking, rotten meat wafted over to them, and then the flames died down, their fuel consumed.

Except for the still burning, sucker-covered pseudopod that reached out and wrapped around the lowest-hanging airship. Acrid black smoke escaped from fissures in its seared, blackened skin, and liquefied fat oozed out of the burning appendage like lava, but it remained able to move. The giant octopus was a seared, eyeless mess, aside from a circular area the death priests occupied, but it kept coming.

Ami watched with horror as it latched onto the hull of the captured airship and squeezed. With a groan, the vessel dipped downwards, the frame underneath its envelope breaking apart.

"Darn it! What does it take to stop that thing?" Ami asked, dropping to her knees in despair. "No! I can't give up now! Those people *need* me!"

Jadeite took a step back as dark power flared around his Empress and she started casting spells like a woman possessed. Lightning bolts, waves of frost, hails of black shards, and firestorms hammered the death priests, lighting up the darkening sky like fireworks.

The eight priests within their shield dome were hard-pressed to keep up with protecting both themselves and the stretched-out bulk of their zombie pet at the same time, and occasionally, Ami managed to land a blow on the mass of char-coaled scar tissue. Half of a tentacle went flying after a telling hit, but she could feel exhaustion setting in. Mentally, she went over her assets again, searching for anything she could use to get at the skeleton mages. Her youma? None had the power to get through the barrier or teleport through it. Jadeite? Too exhausted. The reaperbots? They'd fall off the bucking tentacles before they could get anywhere useful. Rabixtrel? Ditto.

Of course, that was the moment the white-eyed demon burst out from underneath the octopus' skin like a gore-covered jack-in-the-box, right in the middle of the undead coven. The death priests were just as surprised as Ami about the reaper's sudden appearance, and a quick round sweep of his blurring scythe separated closest four from their heads. They had been the group keeping the undead monstrosity in the air. One of remaining robed figures pointed its staff at the red-skinned demon, but decided that discretion was the better part of valour when his three colleagues disappeared with loud pops.

Covered in burning fat and blood, the horned reaper raised his scythe to the sky and bellowed in triumph even as the ground started dropping out from underneath him. He was still roaring when Ami transported him back to the ship, rescuing him from a kilometre-deep drop.

The zombie octopus was not that lucky. At the speed the mollusc hit the water, it felt as hard as concrete, and the creature disintegrated into a splashing mound of carrion, sending house-high waves rippling outwards from its impact point.

"Where did the death priests go now?" Ami asked, scanning around frantically. After all that had happened, she wouldn't put it past them

to spring another surprise. She cut loose the airship their giant monster had ruined so it couldn't drag the others down, and started transporting its reaperbot cargo to her surviving vessels.

"They have retreated to the dungeon," Cathy's voice came from the crystal ball rolling across the floor. "They are raising shields around their captives. You are within spellcasting range of their dungeon now. Evidently, they expect you to destroy the sacrifices before they can make use of them," she reported.

Ami could see how that would be a concern if the death cult was fighting any other Keeper than her. In this particular case, however, it was to her advantage. "Well, that's convenient. That means I won't need to be as precise when I collapse the tunnels leading to the temple. But Cathy, is something wrong? You sound queasy."

"It's- well, the prisoners." Cathy's face had a sick, greenish sheen. "There's really no gentle way to say this. They all had their eyes plucked out so they couldn't make trouble."

Ami jerked as if hit, her mind shying away from the monstrosity of it all. She was sure that her bile would be rising if this golem body had any. "Th-the children too?"

Cathy closed her eyes and nodded once.

Cold rage simmered in Ami's heart as her bright crimson gaze focused on the fog-covered island, a dark stain against the setting sun. Crowned Death and his minons would pay, she promised herself. Her armoured gauntlets, balled tightly into fists, groaned as her fleet charged onwards into the blood-red sunset. They. Would. Pay.

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Bombardment

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An imp sprinted through the trembling tunnels, trying to out-race the wrath of the dark empress. Behind it, the rock groaned like a wounded animal. The brown-skinned minion risked a look back over its shoulder when it heard an earth-shaking rumble, and immediately wished it hadn't. A thick cloud of ash-coloured dust was barrelling down on its position. Moving its little legs so fast that they were almost a blur, the minion put all of its strength into getting away. Alarmed, it heard a series of regular cracks get closer, but it's survival instinct was stronger than its curiosity, and it didn't dare take a peek and potentially stumble.

It didn't have to, either, since the noise was getting closer and closer, threatening to overtake the fleeing creature. When it did, the imp saw the twin row of columns lining the corridor topple like dominoes, forming the leading edge of the destruction unleashed by Keeper Mercury.

Speaking of which, the ground was now only vibrating a little, and the noise was quieting down. Well, aside from the sound of more pillars toppling ahead. Perhaps she was finally running out of power? The imp stopped and turned around, just in time to receive a face full of floating dust. It sneezed and blinked back down the way it had come. While it was hard to see through the swirling dust particles in the air, one thing was certain. The dungeon's portal had disappeared under tons and tons of rubble and debris, leaving a gaping hole in the ceiling.

Almost as soon as the imp realised what had happened, it felt its Keeper desire to have the entrance dug out again. Right now. Curses. Painted grey from the tip of its drooping ears to its toes, the tiny minion made its way back toward the dangerously unstable disaster area. It shivered whenever loose debris shifted under its feet and caused more dust to trickle down from the split-open ceiling. Muttering, the worker lifted its pick over its head to take a

swing at a boulder that looked as if its disappearance would not cause an avalanche.

Out of a blue-greenish flash, a lightly-armoured, definitely female form made of ice appeared in the path of the strike.

The imp looked up at the creature looming over it, then at the small trickle of water seeping out of the injury. To the boggling minion's horror, the length of metal now embedded in the newly-created golem's stomach did not seem to inconvenience the intruder at all.

A glittering hand reached toward the minion with hostile intent.

Clad in her battle armour, Ami stood in front of her command chair with her arms outstretched. Power coursed inside her transparent golem body as she channelled spell after spell, causing light to pour from the gaps between the pieces of her harness. Only low growls escaping from between her clenched teeth from time to time betrayed her fury. Hammering the enemy dungeon with Zarekos' fortification-destroying cave-in spell was rather therapeutic, so she did it again and again and again. Of course, she wasn't picking targets at random. The enemy portal had been the first to disappear under the collapsing ceiling. Now Clairmonte's subordinate Keepers would not be able to send reinforcements, and neither would the death priests be able to flee with their prisoners.

"Losing altitude on vessel four," Cathy's voice reported from one of the six crystal balls forming a hexagon around the teenage senshi.

Ami frowned, unhappy that the necessary task required her to divert her attention from the assault. She hadn't bothered naming her vessels, instead numbering them for expediency's sake. Cathy had mentioned an even number, so the airship in question was to the right side of her centrally-located flagship. Since the given numbers increased with distance, she immediately knew to refill the outermost vessel from the helium bottles she had brought for just that purpose. In passing, she noticed that the imps crawling across the designated vessel's tattered envelope with hammers, nails, and large spools of fabric sounded even squeakier than usual from the

escaping lifting gas.

Ami wished she had a dungeon heart with the fleet so that patching over the tears in the envelopes and sealing the holes in the gondolas would have been easy. Instead, she had to dedicate another part of her valuable attention to transporting boards and other repair materials to her swarm of workers. While the sound of their hammers echoed through the damaged cabin, Ami spied with her Keeper sight on the glass map at the home dungeon, which was being updated in real time by her warlocks.

There were enemy troops dropping in to get rid of the golem preventing the portal from being unearthed. Good, the simulacrum still lived. As long as it did, she only needed to focus on it to see its location, eliminating the need to scry. She could deal with the situation without delay, then.

Three sword-wielding skeletons looked up just before a fireball exploding out of a suddenly-appearing distortion in the air reduced them to scattered piles of blackened bones.

Ami remotely created another ice golem to replace the one she had just melted, dropping it on top of the mountain of unstable rubble.

Her icy twin picked up on her plan and kicked lose an avalanche of boulders that thundered down the shifting heap, right toward the additional undead pouring into the room.

Ami frowned after checking the battle map back home again. Clairmonte clearly wasn't busy enough if he had time to send more imps toward the tunnels she had just collapsed. His efforts to clear the way to the temple needed to be stopped.

"Tiger, crystal ball! Temple level, sector five, south-west, fourteen degrees!" Ami barked out.

"Right!" The striped youma grabbed the foremost orb and concentrated on bringing the called-out location into focus.

Ami selected the corrupted version of her Shabon Spray Freezing for this task, and hurled the spell at the rubble the imps were trying

to clear. In the crystal ball, she saw the sharp-edged black shards ricochet around the tunnel, tearing apart the diggers and dissolving them back into greenish motes. She winced when she spotted some of the wretched-looking captives further back cower in fright when they heard the noise. Even through the purple shimmer of the death priests' shield, she could see the black tracks running down their cheeks from their empty eye sockets. Her expression soured. Clairmonte needed an extra-vicious reminder to worry about his own safety first.

An ice golem clad in Sailor Mercury's uniform approached the figure wreathed in magical energies and wrapped her arms around the large ice container that appeared before her, retrieved from its padded and cooled storage box. The statue jumped upwards and disappeared in a burst of green light halfway through its somersault. It reappeared in a chamber filled with a green glow and a sinister heartbeat, close to the enemy dungeon heart - the real one.

Ami would have preferred for the experienced simulacrum to appear right on top of the arches decorated with skeletal snakes that surrounded the central pit. Unfortunately, here at the centre of the artefact's power, its presence was strong enough to prevent even her from remotely casting spells directly into its vicinity. Transportation based on the travel spell of mere imps did not stand a chance.

The golem, forced to appear some distance away, threw the flask like an oversized basketball. It spun, reflecting the glow of the green twister of mana swirling above the central pit, and descended towards its target.

Ami snatched her trained and empowered golem back to the airship as soon as the projectile had left its hands to save her from the attentions of the guards.

One of the black blurs that could only be sped-up vampires interposed itself between the descending container and its target at the last moment. His hands lashed out, snatching the thin walled-container out of the air - only for it to burst apart and splash him with its liquid contents. As the vampire went down with a shriek, some of the glittering droplets continued past him and disappeared behind

the low wall circling the heart's pit. As soon as they touched the beating, fleshy membrane at its bottom, the dim light in the enemy dungeon flickered for a moment.

Ami felt that a small measure of justice had been done when the membrane quivered and twitched in agony, and fumes started rising from the frothing acid burns. *A successful distraction,* she concluded when the enemy Keeper immediately dropped more undead troops into the room to defend his heart. However, a glance outside at the sun disappearing behind the skull-shaped mountain of the island wiped her satisfaction away, replacing it with worry. Her fleet would reach the island with only minutes to spare before the edge of the orange-red disc touched the horizon, and the time for the captives ran out.

Dandel squinted against the setting sun. Its brightness had dimmed enough that she could keep her telescope pointed at the dark empress' diminished fleet without harming her eyes. With interest, she noted the constant gunpowder flashes flaring up along the four surviving vessel's keel. Cannon fire, she deduced. Unfortunately, her telescope just wasn't good enough to make out the targets through the mists that gave Dreadfog Island its name. In the crimson light, they looked as if a billowing tide of blood was pouring forth from the maw of the skull-shaped hill at its centre. Hiding her shudder, the indigo-haired fairy muttered in a deadpan tone of voice "Well, we seem to have found out what makes ships disappear in these waters, at least."

"What *made* them disappear," Cerasse corrected from the other flying carpet, pointing down at the pieces of decaying, pale flesh bobbing on the waves below. "I must say that I find this unwholesome mess disquieting."

"There could still be more big monsters hidden down there," Dandel contradicted, still observing the distant battle.

"Then why are we getting *closer* to the surface?" Camilla protested, digging her fingers into the flying carpet's wool so she wouldn't slide down its steep incline.

"Yeah, why?" Anise agreed with her blonde sister. "It stinks. It really, really stinks," the redhead commented, pinching her nose shut between her thumb and index finger.

"That's to be with rotting zombie chunks littering the area as far as the eye can see," Dandel replied. "In any case, we are going to investigate that." The eldest fairy gestured toward some wreckage drifting on the red-stained tides. "It's our best opportunity to learn more about Mercury's vessels without getting closer to them."

The two carpets carrying the seven short-haired fairies closed in on the tattered wreck of Keeper Mercury's airship, or at least the parts still drifting on the waves.

"It's hollow," Camilla commented as she spotted parts of tattered envelope clinging to remains of the framework. "Like some sort of giant balloon."

"So these things may be less dangerous than we first thought," Dandel commented.

"Less dangerous? Didn't you see what they did to that enemy fleet?" Roselle shouted. "One moment, white fog. The next moment, fwooosh!" the orange-haired fairy raised her hands over her head as she gesticulated. "Giant freaky blue flames and roast Kraken! First a cloud, then a flame! I'm never going to be able to at clouds the same way again!" she complained.

"What I meant," Dandel clarified, slightly irritated at her sister's excitement, "is that they are less dangerous than they would be if they were also stuffed to the brim with troops, in addition to also having the dark empress herself on board."

"Oh, that makes sense."

"Intriguing." Cerasse spread her wings and fluttered closer to the drifting objects, trailing golden glitter as she left the hovering carpet to get closer. "What do you think these metal cylinders are for?" She looked as if she was considering landing on the empty gas bottle.

"Cerasse, get back! It's dangerous!" Melissa shouted. "I think I saw

a millipede as long as my forearm digging into that chunk of meat near you," Melissa said, scuttling backwards to the centre of her flying carpet.

The violet-eyed fae glanced over at the offending object contaminating the water and air with its foul excretions. "That's just a carrion eater. They don't go after the living."

"It taking a bite out of your leg and spitting it out once it realises its mistake wouldn't be much comfort! Did you see the mandibles on that thing?"

"Yes, yes," the fairy fluttering this way and that way replied, clearly not listening. "Hmm, this wood looks older than the rest."

"Well, there were other ships involved in the battle," Anise pointed out, her hands on the grips of her short swords as she nervously scanned the surface of the ocean. "Do we have to stick around here? As Dandel said, there could be more monsters underneath the surface."

"I sense magic from that direction," the soft-spoken diviner of the group said, opening her sapphire eyes. "Under that piece of tarpaulin."

"This?" Cerasse headed over and fished the elongated rod out of the water. Her nose twitched with disgust as she held it between two fingers and rinsed off the oily grime with a spray of summoned water. "I thought it was some driftwood, but this seems to be a magical staff," she commented and dragged one finger over the spiralling coils of the bone-coloured rod.

"Don't touch that! It's a Keeper artefact!" the blonde and youngest fairy warned. "It's probably evil! And unhygienic!"

"But if we study it, we might find out more about the dark empress and her methods," Cerasse pointed out reasonably. "Besides, it's just a magic staff. They- eeek!"

Dandel's head whipped around when she heard her sister's shrill, startled cry, and her indigo eyes opened in alarm when she saw the

cause of the flying fairy's distress. A wet hand made of bone was crawling up her left calf like a spider, squeezing the skin and flesh painfully to get enough purchase on the smooth surface. "Hold still!" the fairly leader shouted at her frightened sister.

With admirable self-control, Cerasse stopped kicking the leg in question and became still, following her sister's order.

An instant later, a pale blue sphere of energy shot towards her, aimed with such precision that it would clip the animated hand without touching the purple-haired fairy.

Unfortunately, the skeletal hand was fast. It leapt just before the burst of freezing magic could tag it. As soon as it slammed against the three-pronged bone staff, it clenched into a fist around its end.

Cerasse looked relieved that the cold, dead thing was off her leg, even though its strong grip had left some bruises. Her face fell when she noticed the additional weight on the bottom of her loot, and she started swinging the priceless artefact around like a golf club as she tried to dislodge the disembodied limb. "Get off! I found that first!"

As if to answer her, the water frothed and fountained upwards, dislodging an upward-moving hail of bones. The whirring pieces aligned themselves in mid-air and moved toward the wrist. Each one made a clacking noise as it snapped into place, reassembling the arm like a jigsaw puzzle. In an instant, the shoulder followed, then the ribcage, and then the remaining parts of the skeleton appeared in a blur of flying pieces.

The violet-haired fairy shrieked as the bone cloud whirled around her and raised one arm to protect herself from the shards slamming into her body on their way to their destination. Among the cries of dismay of her siblings, she heard the noise stop and dared lower the arm. With the obstruction gone, she found herself to skeletal face with a robed and hooded figure that had animal skulls adorning its shoulders.

Before Dandel could take another shot at the creature, she saw Cerasse put her weight on the contested staff and use it like a lever, ramming it between the death priest's legs in a move that obviously

caught the undead mage by surprise. The indigo-haired fae felt a burst of pride as the skeleton suddenly found itself upside-down, the malevolent black magic forming around its free hand dissipating as it had to stop its own levitation spell from dragging it down. Her little sister had reacted like the professional soldier she was! The eldest of the fairy sisters gathered her own magic between her hands. She wasn't going to pass up an opportunity like that, either! She shot a ball of freezing energy at the falling monster. Around her, she could hear her sisters invoke their own magic, lighting up the twilight with rainbow flashes.

The death priest, seeing the colourful wave of destruction closing in around him, let go of the staff and teleported.

"Above!" Melissa shouted, blue eyes going wide.

Dandel could understand her sister's awe at the sight. The monster was calling up fire in its left hand, black lightning in its right, and chanting the incantation for a shield spell at the same time. An incredible display of magical skill. Before she could finish her next spell, a blinding cone of lightning leapt up at the robed being, turning twilight into noon for an instant. When her vision cleared, she spotted Cerasse stare at the three-pronged tip of the staff with her jaw open.

The smoking ashes of the death priest drifted away on the breeze, and the purple-haired fairy's dumbfounded expression slowly turned into a smile. "Whoo-hoo! We shall keep this thing!" she cheered, waving the spiralling bone staff over her head.

"Um, Cerasse, not that I want to rain on your parade," Dandel began, still opening and closing her eyes to get rid of the sparks dancing before them, "but you just gave away our position with that flash."

Down in Clairmonte's dungeon, magical energy coalesced into a frozen copy of empress Mercury. The fleet-footed construct immediately started dashing down the spacious, column-lined corridors, past the gargoyle-headed sarcophagi standing along the

greyish walls, and toward the one area of the enemy dungeon that remained uncharted. It made it almost thirty metres down the hallway to Crowned Death's temple before a black-cloaked blur tackled it. Both went sliding over the smooth, blue-glazed floor tiles. The ice golem's hands reached for the vampire's neck as it skidded across the ground and bounced off a pillar, its shell fracturing with a clinking noise.

The vampire on top of the prone statue put his clawed hand through its chest, wincing as water fountained from the hole. His blood-shot eyes widened as the ice shell attempted to seal itself around the limb, closing like manacles around his wrist. In a flurry of panicked activity, the bloodsucker brought his other arm around in a scything arc, snapping off the golem's head with a single blow. His eyes almost popped out of their sockets when the statue underneath him shrank and started growing a new head. Relying on his superior strength, he drew himself back to his feet, lifting the golem off the ground with his stuck-in arm. With a fluid swing, he slammed the statue into the brick wall hard enough to shatter the icy construct completely, sending a spray of shards and clear fluids across the hallway.

Even in death, the ice golem still served Ami's goals. "Recovered a finger. Umbra, tracking spell!"

The shadow-wrapped youma easily caught the icicle-like appendage that had only moments before pierced the vampire's skin. "It's as good as done!"

"Mareki, stand ready to get rid of the remaining vampires if they try to board," the young Keeper ordered telepathically even as she replaced another of the golems deep within Clairmonte's lair. *"We'll be above the island any moment now!"*

"Got it! Here!" Umbra tossed a short, wooden stick smeared with some of the vampire's blood back to Ami, who caught it in an armoured gauntlet.

Focusing on the hastily-enchanted charm, she could sense the

location of the blood's owner below, and targeted it with a lightning bolt. She could feel the incinerated vampire's location change abruptly as he reappeared in his coffin, and she fired another spell at him.

The presence of the vampire remained in the same place, so she electrocuted him agai- no, wait, he had managed to dodge and teleport away. Hmm, he had dashed underneath the cover of one of the death priests' shields.

Ami dropped the charm to the ground, where an imp snatched it up and brought it to a small pile of similar objects. She didn't have time to wait until the bloodsucker poked his head out again. Her airships were now travelling over solid ground.

As the dirigibles flew overhead, tremors shook the ground of Dreadfog Island, weakening its fortifications and causing the skull mountain to lose of few stone teeth. The long tubes of claimed territory interconnecting the vessels suddenly snapped in the middle and dropped down like long tentacles, hitting the rock with a loud clapping sound. Even as the airships' forward motion dragged them along, reaperbots appeared out of thin air at their ends and jumped off, assembling into looming, scythe-wielding squads.

Weapons held high and ready to strike, the behemoths marched in eerie unison, their metallic steps sending vibrations through the ground with each step. Behind them, the landing imps hid in Sailor Mercury's protective mist, quaking in fright as groans and clawing noises coming out of the more natural fog challenged the invaders.

A death priest in purple-lined black robes prostrated itself in front of the large, square temple basin deep within the dungeon. Its bald skull reflected off the lustrous blue floor that had been smoothed to a mirror finish. It did not dare raise its gaze to look at the wheel-sized crown of black flame rotating slowly underneath the temple's ceiling.

Its wearer, an almost invisible shadow only slightly darker than its surroundings, had to stoop to fit its bulk into the cathedral-sized hall. When it moved, a shimmer in the air briefly rendered its features

more clearly visible. Skin stretched over bone, without a layer of flesh in between to soften the contours of the cadaverous face, and yellow eyes with slitted pupils focused on the cleric before them. "Speak."

"Great and terrible Incarnation of Extinction," the skeleton priest intoned reverently, "the blasphemous Keeper Mercury has landed troops on the surface and is throwing truly ruinous amounts of magic at our defences."

"She is not holding anything back, because she knows that my success will be her end," the demonic entity replied, its voice a whisper like air moving through dead grass.

"Nevertheless, she could potentially disrupt the ceremony, your Unholiness. Keeper Clairmonte's current performance leaves much to be desired. He seems taken aback by the sheer intensity of the blasphemer's attack."

"It does not matter. We either use the resources assembled here or lose them, so we shall proceed as planned. Even if we are interrupted, we shall simply try again until we succeed. Death is infinitely patient," the being announced grandiosely. "Once I have a body that can exist in this world, this so-called empress shall be among the first lives I extinguish."

Rapid, clattering footsteps approached from outside, prompting the spectral being to unhurriedly turn its head toward the bejewelled double door. A smug grin appeared on its face, and the portal's wings parted on their own accorded, catching the two ice golems sprinting down the corridor by surprise. Its gaze lingered on their lithe forms for an instant.

Both fell over synchronously, cold and lifeless like the ice they were made from even before they hit the ground.

"Summon the Avatar's mantle. Nobody is going to be able to take it from me. Not Keeper Mercury. Not even the Avatar. Nobody."

Backfire - Part 1

Originally on 2011-05-11T02:59:00

One of the six crystal balls positioned around Ami activated itself, showing her the Avatar's tired and grim-looking face.

"Crowned Death's cultists are bringing my mantle back into this world at this moment. The Light will lock it in place and prevent them from throwing it back into the temple's pool." He scowled as fiercely as he could while suffering from a blocked, red-skinned nose. "The enemy *will* figure out how to break the lock sooner or later, so hurry and recover it! This is the only chance you will get! Do not fail!"

"I do not intend to," Ami replied, looking directly into his eyes through the orb resting on a pedestal before her. Her helmet covered her face, but her voice was more than enough to convey her determination. While her first glimpse into the temple proper had been cut short by the destruction of her golems, it had been enough to strengthen her resolve. She had not been impressed by the polished obsidian skulls leering down from the walls, but the sight of the butcher knives arranged around the high altar had shaken her. She imagined that the empty basin underneath the metal grid at its centre was supposed to hold the Avatar's mantle and receive the victims' blood raining down from above. Her mind mercilessly analysed the rest of the arrangement, and concluded that the poor sacrifices would be ushered up the shallow ramp to the right, murdered, and then tossed off the balcony and into the pit to the left once they were used up. Ami gritted her teeth. She *would* save them from that ignoble fate!

"Avatar, I have a question. I saw a crown made of black-flame above the temple's central basin just before I lost contact with my ice golems. Could Crowned Death himself be present in that temple?"

"Unless the ground is belching forth demons, the ocean is turning into poison, and the dead are rising from their graves, I'd claim with

confidence that he isn't," Amadeus dismissed the notion.

Ami quickly surveyed the battlefield through the eyes of her creatures. "Um, I'm not so sure about that last point you listed yet," she said, sounding a bit taken aback.

The water around the island shore was frothing, bubbling and disgorging various examples of dead aquatic life.

The young empress' eyes widened at the sight of a half-rotten shark flopping onto the shore at the forefront of the undead swarm, heading for her troops.

The oily-shimmering liquid in the central basin of Crowned Death's temple quivered and bulged upwards. Its surface burst with a spitting noise, and something so white it glowed in the gloom shot up into the air.

A death priest wearing richly-embroidered robes stood at the edge of the basin and swept his battle stuff upwards, intent on catching the Avatar's mantle as it came tumbling back down. With the holy artefact draped over his casting implement, he swivelled around in place and raised a foot to walk toward the altar on the opposite side of the room.

At that moment, the silver runes sewn into the seam of the white garment pulsed with light, and a physical force catapulted the ornately-dressed skeleton backwards. The mantle remaining floating in place, fluttering as if carried by an unseen breeze.

The unfortunate death priest, his weapon and bones coated with a strange golden glow, flailed his arms as his purchase-seeking foot stepped into emptiness. Toppling backwards, the dark cultist dropped into the temple's basin, causing no splash as he disappeared underneath the surface.

"Idiot," the Incarnation of Extinction commented, managing to make even an exasperated hiss sound menacing. It looked down at the mantle, whose pure glow lit up the place with unseemly brightness

"What is this?" An almost invisible hand attached to an emaciated arm closed around the glowing artefact as the hulking towering Incarnate reached down. Floor tiles cracked underneath the bulky shadow as it tugged and pulled at the garment. The creature's efforts stamped deep indentations in the shape of bird feet into the ground before it decided that brute force wasn't going to budge the thing.

"Troublesome, meddling Light gods," the demonic entity growled, letting go and taking a step away from the obstinate mantle. The shadow of its hand brushed over the liquid within the temple's central basin, causing the oily sheen on its surface to move around in a spiral pattern. The spectre brought its decaying face close to the whirlpool and stated "Come."

Instantly, three dark shapes appeared below, growing larger rapidly as they shot toward the surface. Propelled by black-feathered wings, the grey-skinned dark angels erupted from the basin and alighted on the ground before the pool. Folding up their wings, they inclined their heads toward the transparent monstrosity looming before them. "Honoured Incarnation of Extinction. What are your orders?"

"Break through those protections," their employer ordered, stabbing a claw at the glowing mantle floating in mid-air.

Three sets of dull red eyes peered at the Avatar's mantle curiously for a moment, then met each other. Without further words, the shirtless angels took positions around the holy artefact, each one standing at the points of an equilateral triangle. They spread their wings, braced themselves, and pointed their palms at the garment.

The Incarnation of Extinction turned away when beams of darkness started crawling across the fabric, sliding off it like water from a waxed surface. An impatient expression appeared on its face as it frowned at the empty and unstaffed altar. "Now what is taking these fools so long with my sacrifices?"

On the island's surface, the wall of metal that was Ami's reaperbot force clashed with the tide of undead flesh crawling, walking, and

flopping out of the ocean. Most of the rotten and skeletal attackers did not pose much danger to her automatons individually, but they threatened to wear her troops away with sheer numbers. The teenager felt queasy at the sight of the abattoir her troops' whirling scythes were turning the battefield into.

In contrast, Rabixtrel was enjoying himself greatly as he moved across the gore-splattered ground like a bladed whirlwind of destruction. Wherever he turned, moaning and hissing monstrosities in all sizes came at him, almost as if they were eager to throw themselves on his curved blade.

Ami quickly pulled two of her reaperbots up to the safety of her airship when she noticed the decaying bulk of a whale trying to roll over them. A quick fireball, and the giant zombie exploded into a fountain of wet carrion and black smoke. The smell was horrible even from up here. Ami thought that most of it probably came from the grime-coated automatons she had just rescued, though, and she quickly moved them back down to the ends of the tubes dragging over the battlefield.

Her imps were suffering the most during this fighting, since they had working noses and could be harmed even by tiny nuisances that her other troops ignored. Having dead shrimp nibbling on one's toes had to be a miserable feeling.

"Tiger, raise some rock barriers around the excavation points," she ordered. "That should keep most of the maritime undead away."

"All right. Just keep the vampires off me, okay?" the youma acknowledged before teleporting away, leaving a column of crumbling dirt behind.

Vampires were pretty much the only serious danger to Ami's invasion as long as the death priests were busy elsewhere, and she made a point blasting them with lightning as soon as she spotted them. She thought that in a way, she should feel flattered that Crowned Death saw it fit to throw everything and the kitchen sink at her, even if it was more of an irritation. Things like that dead starfish chewing on a reaperbot's soles could only pose a danger if the automaton in question slipped while stepping on it. The sheer

weirdness of some of his minions, however, was enough to make her scratch her head.

Well, I guess it's made of dead bodies, technically, but... Really, a coral reef? Ami shot a last look at the animated mass of calcium carbonate that crept up the beach like the world's largest caterpillar, shook her head, and decided to ignore it. At the speed it was going, it would reach her troops in an hour or so. Ami unleashed two more tremor spells into the tunnels below to both keep the death priests on their toes, and remove fortifications from the walls.

Her shabon spray - the normal version, since she would not use the corrupted acidic fog around innocent prisoners - flooded the catacomb-like tunnels of the dungeon in several locations, most of which were completely unrelated to her actual angle of attack. The mist was very noticeable and would make it harder for Clairmonte to guess where she would breach his walls first. As an added advantage, it hid the slight distortion that appeared in the air moments before her spells arrived and gave the enemy some warning.

Ami aimed a twice-empowered lightning bolt directly at one of the skeleton clerics maintaining the shield around the prisoners. Even blind, they had fled his unnatural presence, and so she dared take a shot at him. Just as his shield started wavering, she felt her territory being breached. A boarder! She immediately relocated from the front of her flagship's cabin to the back with her Keeper transport. "Mareki! More vampires!"

Instead of an answer, the tailed youma unhinged her jaw. Water gushed forth from her maw in a torrent, which she swept toward the two undead boarders.

Retreating before their weakness, the bat-like blurs hopped over toppled crates and through the empty cargo hold - right into an open hand made of ice that closed on one of them with a squelching and crunching noise. Even as the first vampire disappeared in a flash of blackness, the Keeper hand darted toward the other, delivering a punch that squished its target and dented the cabin's wall.

Shouting to make herself heard over the metal ringing like a gong,

Mareki shouted "They are a pest! When are we going to be back over open water again?"

Ami reappeared between her crystal balls, splashing through one of the puddles left behind by the youma's attack. "We'll be over a small lake in less than ten seconds now. Until then, stay vigilant!" Unfortunately, she couldn't just fly out over the ocean again. The tubes hanging down from the airship needed to remain in contact with the ground her imps were claiming as they dug access tunnels to the enemy dungeon. Even with Tiger's ring-shaped blockades around the entrances, the workers remained a favoured target for the enemy Keeper. Perhaps she could let them have a go at that coral reef if the battle took long enough. Having an enemy they were designed to defeat might cheer them up.

Speaking of defeating the enemy, she needed to get rid of the death cultists and recover that mantle. Brute force was impractical given the presence of hostages, but perhaps an unexpected melee attack would work?

Reading the Keeper's intent, her most experienced golem somersaulted, teleporting itself into the tunnels below. It appeared behind a sarcophagus just as the ceiling shook and crumbled, forcing three of the skeletal creatures to raise their staves to deflect a few falling bricks. An instant later, lightning flashed down from a distortion in the air, and the empowered simulacrum made its move. Darting out from behind its cover with its skirt and ribbons fluttering, it lunged for the closest of the evil clerics.

Ami watched it slam into the purple-glowing barrier and slow down, but without stopping completely. In her head, she was cheering the ice statue on as it fought to break through the shield, struggling as if it was moving through syrup. She didn't expect the priests to drop their protective field with no warning whatsoever.

With the resistance gone, the simulacrum shot forward, slamming into one of the robed figures. Its punch lashed out at the monster, who yanked its head to the side in a move that would have killed any living creature. The icy fist still managed to graze the priest's jaw and took it clean off. The flying jawbone almost clipping one of the blind sacrifices whimpering on the floor as it skidded across the

ground.

Before the golem could finish the dark priest off, one of his companions teleported, catching both Ami and the ice statue by surprise. With the three-pronged end of its battle staff jabbed into the simulacrum's sailor collar, there was no dodging the crackling black beam that shot from the artefact's tip.

Ami had a split second to feel a sucking sensation, and then everything went black.

"Crap!" Mareki shouted when the empress toppled without warning, her armour clattering loudly as it hit the ground.

"Mercury? Cathy just collapsed!" came Snyder's slightly panicked voice from the crystal ball. "Her transformation dissolved! Did something happen?"

The human's whine grated on the tailed youma's nerves. Couldn't he see that they had more important things happening here? "Shut up! She's not available right now!"

Tiger appeared in the room amidst a cloud of dust, scowling. "Dammit, that last vamp almost got me! Your stupid bots aren't helping, just standing around and- " she paused and blinked when she spotted the slight figure sprawled out on the ground. "Lord Jadeite, what happened here?"

The dark general rushed to Ami's side, turned her on her back, and started removing her helmet. "I don't know! She just fell over!" He managed to tear the helmet off, breaking a few strands of icy hair in the process, and stared down at the frozen face. "No tiara," he remarked, his voice unsure.

Mareki could understand why he was hesitating. How was one supposed to take the life signs of an ice golem, or treat its injuries? From the crystal balls, she heard shouts and excited goblin babble. It sounded as if the operation was quickly descending into chaos at the home base too. At least two or three of the warlocks were giving

conflicting orders. *Just great, with them confusing the pilots, we'll all be neck-deep in bloodsuckers and ghosts here!*

Jadeite managed to pry open one of the armoured statue's eyelids, revealing a faint red glow underneath. "She's still alive," he said, and some of the tension faded from his posture.

"You figure out how to wake her up, I'll make sure that things don't fall apart back at the dungeon," Tiger said, and spread her arms. Her form shrank and her features softened until she was a perfect copy of the unconscious Keeper. "You others, keep the assault going. The imps have their destinations and will breach the enemy dungeon. We'll just have to win this without magical support!"

Mareki would have snapped at the other youma, if she hadn't already teleported away. Who did she think she was, giving orders to her and even a dark general? "Lord Jadeite?" she asked, her lips pursed into a pout.

The curly-haired blond glanced at her from the corners of his narrow eyes, but immediately moved his gaze back to the cold head resting on his knees. "It's better than the alternatives. Do it."

Melicdor had lost track of the number of centuries she had been in the service of Crowned Death. She considered herself a master of all things arcane, as far above mortal archmages as they were above their apprentices. With the additional power granted to her by her sacred staff, few could call themselves her equal in the magical arts. Therefore, she was quite certain that she was not at fault for the unprecedented malfunctioning of the aeons-in-an-instant spell she had hit the enemy Keeper's minion with. Even had she botched the spell, the results couldn't have been anything like *this*.

The cocoon of crackling black magic enveloping the ice golem disappeared from one instant to the other, only for the simulacrum's back to explode. A twisted mockery of the human form hatched from the icy shell like history's ugliest dragon, growing to twice the golem's size in the blink of an eye. The icy creature appeared female, even if it was not immediately obvious with the way she was

crouching. The spiked hunch forming her back reached up higher than the crown of horns decorating her head. Her face still bore a surprising resemblance to the dark empress, at least until she grinned like a very happy, fang-toothed frog.

Melicdor noted that, like some other newborn creatures, the frost-plated abomination appeared to be rather hungry. Unlike most natural creatures however, it seemed to consider High Priest Karmalun, who had dropped to the ground after the golem had let him go, edible and tasty.

A blue-veined tongue shot out of the female monster's grotesquely distended maw, wrapped itself around the skeleton priest on the ground, and yanked him in whole. There were some crunching noises, but somehow, the beast managed to make him fit.

Well, if at first you don't succeed, you can at least not be an idiot who tries the same spell again, Melicdor thought. Had she still possessed a functional survival instinct, she would have shuddered at the hungry look the beast's yellow eyes were shooting her. Instead, she calmly warped space with one hand while channelling fire through her staff. Both spells combined into an arrow-shaped bolt of burning and tearing destruction. She hurled it at the enemy, only to watch her spell dwindle away into nothing as it approached the monster. Was that a burp escaping from the creature's throat? A tactical retreat was in order, the death priest decided. A quick teleport later, she found that something cold had wrapped around her waist, constricting her voluminous robe to a hourglass shape. *Oh, of course a threat of that calibre can teleport too,* she realised as she felt the magic that animated her body drain away. *I should have-* CRUNCH.

The abomination swallowed and let out a demented giggle. Resting on all fours, she pointed her nose upwards and sucked in air through her nostrils like a wolf catching a scent. An instant later, she picked a direction, raised her large, shovel-like hands, and darted forward. Her claws bit into the reinforced brickwork like imp picks, quickly clearing a passage. Soon enough, the corridor was empty except for the sound of rock collapsing in the distance coming from the hole.

Tiger, glamoured to look like Sailor Mercury, floated in front of the three dimensional glass map in the home dungeon. She didn't have Keeper sight, but the frequently-updated map was an adequate replacement for tactical operation purposes. Besides, she could glance at the warlocks' crystal ball to get a more direct idea of what was going on.

So far, the reaperbots were jumping after the imps into the tunnels, abandoning the useless surface to the roving packs of undead vermin. Tiger felt like cackling maniacally as the automatons stormed forward, the pilots obeying her every command. Mercury didn't know how to appreciate this! What could be better than watching her metal-clad hordes charge at her command, slam into the defending line of skeletons outnumbering them twenty to one, and smash them to tiny bits. Especially when their enemy's weapons did little more than dent the armour of the huge automatons.

Tiger actually let out a whoop of joy as one of the metal warriors picked up a skeleton by the legs and used it as a flailing bludgeon, making bone chips fly with every blow. When its victim went completely to pieces, it used the two separate legs it was still holding as throwing implements and decapitated a zombie wearing a pointy wizard hat.

"Scatter!" the youma suddenly shouted, and an instant later, Keeper lightning stabbed down from the ceiling, hitting the centre of her formation and arcing around the different metal soldiers.

Molten steel ran down the hulking forms in small rivulets like a mockery of blood, but the damage seemed superficial in most cases. Two of the warriors remained motionless after the attack, most likely due to internal damage to their gold-to-power converter.

No matter! The vast majority of the troops was still in great fighting shape, and aside from some speedy vampires inflicting unavoidable losses, she didn't think Clairmonte had anything else that was a serious threat.

Ahead in the tunnel, a huge stone boulder trembled and started rumbling toward the invaders massing up within its narrow confines.

A few metres further ahead, it encountered a sudden explosion to its side that pushed it off course, making it crash into the dungeon wall. A secondary explosion sent red-glowing fissures through part of it and removed a fourth of its mass. No longer round, it skidded to a shuddering stop long before reaching the scythe-wielding soldiers.

Tiger grinned. Good. Umbra was obviously putting her stealthiness to good use sabotaging the enemy traps. At the rate her troops were advancing, she'd seize the temple and the enemy dungeon heart before Mercury even regained consciousness. Taunting material for ages! Now if only the imps would get with the program and stop running away from the completely harmless wall they were supposed to dig through. The disguised youma scowled at the crystal ball, narrowing her eyes at the shivering workers shown within. If she could only give them instructions herself! Something needed to be done here. Maybe those wall decorations weren't as innocuous as they looked? "Pilots, smash those ugly statuettes!" she ordered, indicating the crude figurines of narrow-headed monsters sitting in little alcoves.

A few moments of gleeful vandalism later, the imps were approaching the wall with no difficulties at all.

Those statues had been some kind of subtle, mind-affecting trap, then. Good to know, Tiger thought. "Keep destroying those things if you see them! Oh, and try not to step on the prisoners in the next room. I have plans for them that require them alive," she proclaimed. Internally, she felt nervous. In the next hall, the troops would be facing death priests, which had little trouble dispatching reaperbots. She just hoped that swamping them with too many targets to destroy would work. In any case, they were the sole remaining serious danger aside from the Keeper's sporadic spells and Crowned Death's temple.

At that moment, a hulking, armour-plated abomination exploded out of the right wall, sending dust and flying debris at bullet-like speeds through the hallway.

"Shit! Medic! Medic!" a pillar of blackness gasped in pain as it

appeared on the flagship. It quickly resolved itself into the floating figure of Umbra - with a very noticeable absence.

"What happened?" Mareki asked, taking her gaze off Jadeite trying to shock the Empress awake with a weak current in order to stare at the other youma's new injury.

"A fucking monster burst out of the wall and bit off my leg, that's what!" the masked youma snapped. And I was just finished regenerating my arm too! Fuck, this hurts!" She finally spotted Mercury on the floor, and let out a groan. "Just great, now I'll have to teleport all the way back to the dungeon, too. Ouch!"

"This thing?" the tailed, grey-skinned youma held up a crystal ball. "Be glad it only took your leg. It ate a reaperbot that got too close, and didn't even chew much!"

"What did?" A soft voice from the ground asked. Ami's eyes were open, and she looked up at the ceiling in confusion. Her crimson eyes widened as she remembered the situation, and she sat up abruptly. "The attack! How long was I out?"

"Don't panic, it was only for a few minutes," Jadeite tried to calm her. "Your troops were advancing all the time, so things are still proceeding as planned."

Ami's mind flashed through various locations with her Keeper sight, lingering briefly on piles of smashed skeletons and on her imps starting to claim territory for her in the catacombs below. Her reaperbots were in the dungeon proper, which confirmed the dark general's words. With her fear of having failed the prisoners abating, she pulled herself to her feet, noting that her armour felt much heavier than usual.

"Excuse me, wounded here!" Umbra intruded, drawing attention to her leg stump.

Ami touched her right ear and looked at the youma, only to find that her visor wouldn't appear. *I'm no longer transformed,* she realised with a start. She removed her gauntlet from her right hand and transported herself to the injured youma's side. "It's not cursed this

time, is it?" she asked as she wove a necromantic healing spell. She had to switch to the power granted to her by Metallia to make it even work, though. *What is going on here?* "All right, I have stopped the bleeding. Mareki, put some bandages on her! We still have a battle to win!"

"Empress, do you know what knocked you out?" Jadeite asked, sounding worried.

Ami shook her head. "The last thing I remember is one of the death priests hitting my trained golem with their rapid-ageing beam. I lost consciousness an instant later." She pondered how to proceed. First, no crisis needed to be addressed right this moment, so she should make sure she wasn't at any less than full power for the rest of the operation. Standing straight, she locked her armour's limbs in a stable position and then transported herself out of the suit. It wouldn't do to lose her mobile treasury to her senshi transformation. "Mercury Power, Make Up!" The swirls of blue light she was expecting failed to materialise, and she remained an unclad ice statue standing with her arm raised into the air. She blinked. "I- I can't transform?" Quickly, she popped back into her armour. "Why can't I transform?"

"Oh, you are back," Tiger's voice came from the crystal ball reserved for communication with the home dungeon, sounding less than thrilled. "What's with that weird monstrosity bursting through walls? That wasn't in the plan!"

"Please use a painful spell when you destroy it, your Majesty," Umbra requested, lying on the ground. She twitched as Mareki poked at her wound, ready to apply some clean white cloth to the stump.

"Monstrosity?" Ami searched with her Keeper sight, quickly locating the hulking, spike-covered abomination that was responsible for wounding the shadow-using youma. Her eyebrows shot upwards when senses expanded by her dungeon heart reported something else. "What? It's mine? Where did that thing come from?"

"If I may venture a guess," Jadeite said as he approached her position, "I think that used to be your golem. Being hit with that time-

acceleration magic must have given the bit of Metallia's power animating it enough time to develop into a full youma. With your senshi transformation, it would have had enough magic to not starve." He scratched the back of his head. "The creature wouldn't be socialised like normal youma, having been frozen in complete isolation for who knows how long, though."

"That would explain why it has a minion link," Ami agreed. She narrowed her eyes. "It would have been draining magic from my source at an alarming rate while caught in the aging-acceleration spell," she pondered.

Jadeite nodded. "Yes, it draining you dry probably knocked you out."

"But why would power flow from me towards it? We should all be drawing from the same source," the armoured teenager pondered.

"Maybe your source ran dry?" the dark general speculated. "Your senshi powers could be fuelled from a huge but exhaustible reservoir. In that case, we'd be dealing with one extremely powerful wild youma here."

Ami cringed. "Let's assume for now that my inability to transform is simply a consequence of it still monopolising the entire output, okay?" The idea of being permanently blocked from becoming Sailor Mercury scared her, and not only because she would lose access to her computer. "What is a feral youma going to do?"

"Find more food, most likely," Mareki answered. "Growing youma are very voracious."

"So it would be looking for magic," Ami guessed. Suddenly, her eyes lit up with glee. "And what's the most obvious big source of magic around?"

Tiger's grin in the crystal ball mirrored her own. "I get it! Pilots, follow that monster!" she shouted, pointing at the arrow-straight tunnel the youma-golem had disappeared into.

The ice-plated monstrosity was heading straight toward Clairmonte's

dungeon heart with no regard for the intervening terrain, a fact that was causing great distress to the Keeper. His most devastating spells were being absorbed harmlessly into the hulking mass of spikes, and the thing was making lunch out of his greatest vampires. Where had that upstart Mercury found a beast like that?

Keeper Clairmonte raged, far away in another dungeon. His allies were useless. His subordinate Keepers could not enter the blocked portal, and the death clergy was still trying to conduct their ceremony instead of pitching in for the battle. If he had those dark angels defending his fortress instead of poking at the mantle, then he could turn the tide of the battle! Probably. That monstrous ice creature *was* awfully strong. It seemed to still be vulnerable to physical attacks, but throwing monsters into its path was about as useful as throwing them at a horned reaper. One of which that so-called empress had brought too, accursed witch. Things were looking rather bleak, even if the horned demon remained on the island's surface, cheerfully dismembering zombies. Oh well, he wouldn't give up without a fight.

At his mental command, heavy iron latches undid themselves in the remote dungeon heart chamber, and salty seawater flooded the room. Let's see how well the intruders fared against the most dangerous aquatic creatures in their own element!

It didn't take long for the death-worshipping Keeper to be disappointed by his trap. In a burst of bubbles and floating rocks, Mercury's abomination broke through the ceiling of his dungeon heart chamber. Around it, some of her soulless metal fighters lost their footing and sank like rocks, only to be squished like the tin cans they were by grasping tentacles. His creatures that went for the biggest threat, however, just fell apart as the magic animating them was digested upon touching the beast.

The abominable fiend reached the edge of the dungeon heart's pit, sat down on all fours, and crossed her eyes as she admired the green column of swirling mana streaming upwards like glowing air bubbles from the membrane below. Then, her neck elongated, and her horn-covered head disappeared in the depths below.

The water turned red.

Clairmonte panicked as he felt a stabbing sensation in his chest, followed by his mana being forcefully ripped away from him. What felt like a pain-filled eternity later, but couldn't have been more than several seconds, he felt himself being dragged across space by the death throes of his dungeon heart. The last thing he saw as he was flushed down into the realm of the dark gods was the face of the thrice-damned monstrosity chewing happily on a piece of his dungeon heart's membrane.

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Backfire - Part 2

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The Incarnation of Extinction growled when the decorations fell off the temple walls and the lights went out. It closed its eyes for a moment, and the torches lit up once more, now burning with a white, colourless flame. "Clairmonte has been defeated. Our Master is going to be displeased with him," it hissed. Turning to the dark angels, it asked "Can the mantle be moved yet?"

"I'm afraid not, Great One," the foremost of the winged beings replied, not taking its red eyes off the glistening brightness pulsing around the holy artefact as he wrestled with its protections.

"Then I shall destroy anyone coming to seize it," the flame-crowned shadow stated, sounding almost pleased. "Priests! Attend me!"

Four robed skeletons, wielding spiralling bone staves and wearing animal skulls on their shoulders, shimmered into sight at the hawk-like feet of their master, already kneeling.

"Rise. Clairmonte has failed us. Without him to handle the logistics, the ritual has become infeasible here. Seek out and destroy the enemy Keeper's forces instead, so that we may preserve at least some of the sacrifices for our next attempt. Now go!"

Silent like ghosts, the four leering skulls of the clerics faded away.

The Incarnation of Extinction turned to face the door, eagerly awaiting anything foolish enough to enter its presence.

"Yes! That's the dungeon heart down!" Ami cheered as a tremor pulsed through the island, preceding a sound like a rocky death rattle.

A general cheer on the airship followed her announcement, and

down below, her imps started claiming territory faster, now that it was unclaimed.

"How nice! Now do something about that imbecile of a monster, quickly!" Tiger screeched through the crystal ball. "It's going through the reaperbots like Usagi goes through a plate of cookies!"

Ami winced at the apt analogy and experimentally tugged at her Keeper link to the youma-golem. She was relieved to find it working, and transported her away just before she could pull another automaton into her maw. Now what to do with her?

"Good job!" a female voice piped up from another scrying orb. Keeper Midori, wearing princess Julia's face, was back. A few droplets of blood ran down her left cheek. "Got a bit distracted there, but I managed to catch the end of it. That's an adorable pet you have. Care to trade it for- hey, is that the freaking Avatar in that other crystal ball? You sure like having an audie-"

An imp scuttled up to the glowing orb in question and threw a cleaning rag over it. Ami was too busy to let the other Keeper distract her right now.

"Hey! HEY! How rude!"

"Now, we need to get the mantle back. The temple remains active, and I still can't scry in there, so we need troops. I'll move the automatons to the section of claimed ground in sector eleven. Go for a surround. I want troops on each side, above, and below," Ami ordered.

Just as she was about to transport her warriors, four ornately-robed figures appeared amidst them, battle staves of Calarine meeting at a point above their heads. The sizzling, violet dome surrounding the attackers shoved aside the quicker-reacting reaperbots.

The lunging automatons bounced off the shield and slid to the floor, which saved them from the black beam that one of the four priests swept over the occupied hallway from the right to the left.

Three of the metal warriors crumbled into ancient rust before Ami

could transport them out of the path of the attack.

As her magical counter-attack crept over the dark priests' shield in blinding arcs, one of them tapped the floor with the back of his staff. All four of them disappeared, along with a bowl-shaped section of the floor they had been standing on.

"Darn it! Where did they go?" Ami wondered. This kind of hit-and-run tactics wasn't something the automatons could deal with.

"Incoming," one of the warlocks back in the map chamber shouted, his voice transmitted by Tiger's crystal ball.

Forewarned, Ami spotted the glow underneath the ceiling where the undead quartet reappeared, along with their impenetrable shield dome. Claimed territory! Acting on a hunch, she dropped the golem monster onto the group, rather than trying to brute-force through their protections.

The death priests stumbled as their shield burst like a soap bubble, and before they could recover, the half-ton weight of the frog-mawed abomination landed on them and pinned them down. A split-second later, the room lit up as bright as noon, and a white-burning ball of expanding flame consumed the group.

Ami had chosen not to give the evil, eye-plucking clerics the chance to retreat, and from what she had seen so far, the golem-youma would appreciate the spell as a snack. She had been right too, as she could see her now sitting unharmed within the red-glowing scorch mark on the ground. She swept her tongue across the smoking bone staves on the ground, and with one audible gulp, the priceless artefacts were gone.

Was that Torian Ami could hear burst into tears through the crystal ball? Oh, she had better pick the monster up again. The youma was already eyeing the reaperbots toppled by the explosion and lipping her lips. She was definitely not a team player. *But she could be just what I need to assault the temple!*

Despite the low chanting of the dark angels, the Incarnation of Extinction could hear enemy movement around the temple. Finally. It leaned forward, its transparent bulk darkening. It was tired of waiting. Its minions might have failed, but if that Keeper thought she would ever get that mantle back, then she was sorely mistaken. "Protection spells," it ordered in a bored hiss.

The dark angels barely had a moment to react before the ground trembled. A large pillar toppled, while ceiling blocks came lose and rained down to the ground, forcing the three to dodge.

The Incarnation didn't move to avoid the square column as it smashed straight through its body and cracked the ground. It didn't need to. There was nothing here that could harm it. Its weak minions, however, were coughing up dust and looking disgruntled. "Back to work!" it ordered.

Just then, the richly-decorated double door of the temple was ripped of its hinges, and a supremely ugly humanoid covered in glittering spikes and horns stalked in on all fours. She reared back and giggled dementedly, splitting her face with her grin. Then, she died.

"Next," the Incarnation challenged, watching with slight interested as the freak's corpse turned into dust and then expanded into a large mound of barely-chewed flesh, cracked bones, and mangled pieces of black scrap. A bolt of lightning struck its head and kept going, followed by a fireball, a ball of frost, and a giant hand holding a sword made for its size.

That last attack drew some interest from the Incarnate, in a purely academic sense, but since its death gaze didn't work on it, he opted to smash the limb aside with a furious blow when it floated over toward the trio of dark angels.

I am getting sooo tired of enemies that can just ignore my attacks, Ami thought sourly, shaken by the ease with which the crowned abomination had handled her magic-absorbing monstrosity. She had really expected that ability to protect her. Now, she was just glad she had decided to test the enemy's capabilities before sending her

reaperbots at the giant and losing them all for no gain. Even its physical blows were incredibly fast.

"Avatar, some help here, please! It killed my strongest creature with a look, and my spells have no effect! How do I kill it?" Ami asked, seriously worried now. In the meantime, she targeted the dark angels. The dark-grey skinned beings were quite nimble though and good at dodging her spells, as well as countering them with their own. One of them even formed a group of skeletons from the dust hanging in the air and used them as ablative armour against her hand's attacks.

"That demon is made purely from the spiritual essence of Crowned Death himself," the man replied, his eyes glowing slightly. "Destroy the temple, and it will no longer be able to sustain its existence in this realm. Until it gains a physical body, only attacks with a spiritual component can hurt it. "

"How are you even aiming at it?" Midori wanted to know. "I still can't scry into the temple!"

Ami ignored her. She was glad that the trained rats she was using as her eyes were below the dark spirit's notice. "I don't have spiritual attacks!"

"Your reaper would be able to injure the creature, could he survive its gaze."

Ami nodded. "I'll focus on destroying the temple, then." It was a good thing she had brought as many sapphires as she could. More of the gems disappeared from her shoulder to fuel her battle magic.

"Please hurry. The lock on the mantle will be gone a few minutes," the Avatar continued.

"This is insane!" the deep baritone of a dark angel echoed through the room, swallowed almost completely by the rumble of the collapsing ceiling. The falling boulders smashed straight through the undermined floor, causing the ground beneath him to sink away. He

spread his wings, taking into the air from the rapidly steepening incline, and glided toward the central basin.

"And where do you think you are going?" the Incarnate growled, glancing back at the two other dark angels darting toward the pool while dodging falling rubble.

"You keep telling us you'll be able to hold the enemy off no problem! Just wait the protections out!" the angels' leader said, not looking back.

"Yeah, you didn't pay us enough for something like this!" the second one said, folding his wings for a perfect dive into the basin. He disappeared below just as a metre-tall piece of rock broke off above and plunged toward the unholy well.

At the last moment, it swerved aside, narrowly missing the structure, and continued onwards toward a hole in the ground. Upon closer observation, other rubble acted the same way, repelled by an invisible force from the most essential part of the blasphemous complex.

"Cowards," the Incarnation of Extinction spat, crossing its arms. Like a motionless titan, it stood vigil over a miraculously undamaged part of the room, which included the basin and remained free of debris and cracks in the ground. Even though the almost-free floating structure was held up only by a few thin pillars of rock that should have long collapsed under its weight, it didn't sway.

The demonic entity looked into the mist-filled cavity below, wiping out a bunch of hapless, digging imps. "Come now, Keeper. If this is the best you can do, you will never defeat me! Oh," it added in a sickeningly sweet voice, and pointed at the dimming mantle. "It looks as if your time is running out, too."

Even without the demon's taunt, Ami was aware that her position was getting untenable. It was becoming increasingly obvious that the creature could protect the temple in defiance of all laws of physics, and her reaper would die the instant it got anywhere near

the monster. It had just demonstrated that it could see through her mist, and was impervious to physical attack. What could she do? She was no Rei with her spirit wards, and lacked any spells with a spiritual component. Or did she?

Well, it was a long shot, but she could give it a try. Skeletons and ghosts had weak life energy, so... "Everyone, out!" she ordered, her tone leaving no room for argument.

The armoured ice girl cupped her hands before her and focused on casting the drain remotely. Her fingertips tingled oddly as she sought out the immaterial bulk of the enemy and gave it an experimental tug. Immediately, a ball of blackness wreathed in ghostly white flame surged up between her hands, and she felt it drag her arms downwards like a lead weight. She had done it! She had some of the creature's life energy in her hands! Sure, it was trying to escape and reunite with its owner, but she had torn something away from the previously invincible beast!

"What are you doing, Keeper?" Amadeus asked, frowning. "That stuff is dangerous."

"What *is* she doing?" Midori asked. "Come on, don't block my scrying like that! This sucks!"

Spirits lifted by her success, Ami yanked as hard as she could, and checked how much damage she was doing to the monster. Her face fell when she had to actually search for the wound, and if she hadn't known where her drain was originating from, she would have missed it.

A scratch, as if made by a house cat's claws, marred the immaterial monster's left arm. Since the creature was much larger than any human, the blemish might as well have been non-existent.

Ami's stomach plummeted. Her hydraulically-enhanced arms were shaking just from trying to keep a grip on the energy she had drained, and that was all the damage it did? This was like trying to empty out a lake with a teaspoon!

Her mind raced as she tried to come up with a solution, and hit on

an idea. Sometimes it wasn't the amount of damage you did, but where you applied it. She let go of the ball of caustic not-quite-life energy and took a deep breath. Her eyes flew wide-open. *Rabixtrel, kill!*

A dark ball of demonic energy between her palms reappeared as she flung the reaper through space, landing him on claimed terrain near the temple.

Within the structure, the death spectre howled and clasped its hands over its eyes, blinded by the tiny slashes in its pupils.

Rabixtrel charged, a red blur hopping from pillar to crumbling pillar as he made his way over to the levitating remains of the temple. His hooves struck sparks as he skidded to a halt near his target. He lashed out with his cursed weapon, lobbing one of the giant spirit's avian toes straight off.

The injured foot blurred and came crashing down on the spot the horned demon had just occupied, only for thim to jump up and cut a gash into its back. A huge palm smashing into the ground forced the red-scaled creature to withdraw before he could swing again, and soon, he was locked in a deadly exchange of attacks, dodges, and counter-attacks with the blinded avatar of destruction.

On Ami's flagship, the ball of energy she was containing with difficulty between her palms started to change. A thin film formed on its smooth top, elongating and darkening.

She gasped when she realised that she was suddenly holding an eye, and transported herself out of its line of sight in the brink of time when it started swivelling downwards toward her. She just managed to grab the thing again before it could return to its main mass.

What followed was a fast-paced, high-staked game of cat and mouse as Ami transported herself around rapidly, always adjusting her grip on the lethal ball of energy as if it was a pivot and outracing

its turning speed. *Rabixtrel! Hurry!"* she shouted as she desperately tried to stay ahead of the thing's gaze.

An imp ran up behind her and leapt, ramming her adamantine dagger into the spectral eyeball, at the cost of meeting its gaze. Weapon and imp clattered to the ground, having dispersed the evil eye for the moment. Unfortunately, Ami could already see it starting to reassemble itself. She used the momentary reprieve to check how her horned reaper was doing. Oh, he had somehow managed to race up the immaterial creature's back and was heading for the neck! This was going to be a killing blow!

Then, the enemy cheated by growing a third hand from his back and closing it around the reaper's legs and torso. The new arm flipped him over and hammered him head-first into the ground, hard-enough to crack the floor. Then it raised him and did it again. And again. On the eighth repetition, the ground crumbled away, and the hand finally let the limp and unmoving form drop into the resulting hole.

Ami whimpered and stared at the reforming eye. She'd have to defeat the monster by herself now, and she could only do so by draining it dry. Unfortunately, she needed a way to get rid of the syphoned energy first so it couldn't snap back to its owner as if it was linked to it with a rubber band. A glance at the almost faded glow of the Mantle forced her to consider options she'd otherwise reject as too risky. She gulped and muttered in an abject tone of voice "I- I'll have to consume it."

The Avatar's eyes bugged out. "You want to eat a lesser aspect of Crowned Death? You are insane!"

"Wait, what?" Midori's muffled voice came from the covered crystal ball. "Take this stupid rag off! I want to watch!"

Ami called upon Metallia's power, using ten parts of the dark goddess' magic to dilute one part of Crowned Death's vile essence before absorbing it. The alien power writhed and burned in its confinement, trying to eat away at its surroundings even as she drew it into herself and into her dungeon heart. She was using the fact that the artefact counted as part of herself to establish the remote connection, and aimed for the garbage disposal unit that got

rid of the chaotic magic released by stopping her transformation from affecting her minions. Even though she shunted the vile concoction as quickly toward its destination as she could, her body died within two seconds.

The black-armoured ice golem fell over, but a red-eyed mass of darkness remained floating in its place, still absorbing a stream of power from the orb shrouded in spectral flames before it.

Ami concentrated harder than she had ever concentrated before, knowing that her life depended on it. She could feel the dark god's energy trying to slip from her grasp, tear her apart, and wear away at her very substance, even in this immaterial form. Given the slightest opening, it would erase all that she was, devour her, and add what was left to itself. The knowledge of how many lives depended on her gave her the will to struggle on, despite the weakened and diluted essence searing her.

Faces of eyeless children crying tears of blood flashed through her mind, fanning her anger and determination. This would happen again if she failed! Even more motivated now, she increased the drain. At first, the effect was subtle, but soon, she noticed that the more energy she pulled away, the easier it flowed. Fighting through the pain, Ami yanked harder.

Underground, pieces of the floating temple ruins started breaking off at the edge, and the Incarnation of Extinction staggered. "You can't do this to me! This is impossible!" it howled as it felt more and more of itself disappear. The lesser aspect of Crowned Death felt a pull that dragged it upwards and got stronger with every passing second. It extended a ghostly arm toward the Avatar's mantle, which had started sinking toward the ground.

The pulling force tugged the creature away before it could grasp the garment.

Desperate, the being clawed a the disintegrating ground, trying to drag itself forward. Its eyes widened as its hold on the world grew too weak to maintain its grip, and it felt itself shooting upwards, away

from the temple and through the rock layers above. "Death cannot die! Noooooooooo!" Instinctively, it reached out for any trace of familiar power around itself and consumed it in order to stave off its own end.

"Girls! Look!" Melissa shouted, pointing at the island crawling with undead ahead. An unshaped blob of darkness was rising from the ground, anchored to the surface with uncountable black lines.

Dandel drew her telescope and brought it up in one smooth motion, just in time to see the shape strike the gondola of one of the battered air vessels. At the same moment, the black trails of necrotic energy attached to it disappeared. The indigo-haired fae's jaw dropped.

A bit later, an insistent poke between her wings drew her attention back to her sisters. "Sorry, could you repeat that?"

Anise put her arms akimbo and pouted. "For the third time, what did you see?"

Dandel lowered her telescope slowly. "I think Empress Mercury just did something to make that entire army of undead creatures stop moving."

On the airship, the last bit of the Incarnation of Extinction disappeared into the crimson-eyed, grimace-like shape of Ami in her possession transition state. A moment later, she reverted to her real body. The blue-haired girl wearing her schoolgirl uniform hit the ground with a thud and remained lying flat on her belly, her arms spread. "R-recover the mantle," she whispered in the direction of Tiger's crystal ball. Too exhausted to move, she focused her Keeper sight on the demonic metal figures storming toward the temple's remains.

Soon enough, they were climbing across the shaky debris toward the pure white garment that glimmered on the ground.

"YOU WILL NOT HAVE MY PRIZE!" a hollow voice roared so loudly that it shook the ruined chamber and blasted the intruders backwards. A pillar of purest darkness shot from the dwindling liquid in the temple's basin, curved down, and struck the Avatar's mantle head on. The blackness exploded outwards, forming a huge crown-shaped field of force around the mantle.

The last motes of light around the garment flared up brighter. It burst into flame, shrivelling up like a desiccating leaf and wadding up into a ball. Its glow dimmed, growing darker and darker until it was pitch black and rose from the ground in a tar-like column. The apparition bubbled and started taking on a more defined shape.

"Keeper! Crowned Death is consuming the mantle to bring some other creature into this world! *Do something!*" The Avatar demanded, his face distorted by its proximity to his own crystal ball.

"Seconded!" Keeper Midori's frightened squeak came from the covered crystal ball. "You got to stop him!"

"I'm trying!" Ami groaned back hoarsely, marshalling what remained of her magical strength. "Nothing I do is getting through the shield around it!" Through the raging inferno of her own spells turning the ground around the mantle into lava, she could see a humanoid shadow appear. It looked vastly less impressive than the Lesser Aspect she had defeated, probably due to the lack of ritual. Nevertheless, she redoubled her efforts to break through the dark god's protective wall of force.

"BRING DEATH AND DESTRUCTION TO THE WORLD IN MY NAME!" Crowned Death's voice thundered at the same his chosen champion arrived fully within the protective field.

Ami blinked at the figure that had appeared inside the dark dome and was whipping its head left and right, as if surprised to be here. She had not expected it to be so pink. It cringed and covered its head with its hands when she slammed a particularly bright and powerful bolt of lightning into the barrier. The creature was an elf, Ami realised, or at least it looked like one. Despite the smooth,

snow-white skin and the long pink hair, the wild-eyed new arrival was clearly male. She was sure about that, since he had not been summoned with any clothes.

While she was distracted by that observation, the slender man took a last look at his surroundings and disappeared into a vortex of red energy.

"Darn it! He got away!" Ami groaned even as Crowned Death's barrier collapsed and the last remnants of the temple went inert. She had a dreadful feeling about this.

"What was it? What did it look like?" Midori demanded to know, sounding less whiny and more insistent than before.

Figuring that the other Keeper, or at least the Avatar, might know more about the creature, Ami focused on delivering a short, concise description. "Like an elf. Pointed ears, male, slender but tall, not muscular, white skin, pink hair that reached almost to the ground, brownish eyes."

"Hmm, that sounds vaguely familiar," the covered crystal ball commented.

Amadeus' face had gone completely blank. When he spoke next, his voice was cold as ice. "Did he have a horizontal scar on the bridge of his nose?"

Ami thought for a moment, then nodded. "It could have been a shadow, but I think so, yes."

The Avatar's face transformed into a mask of pure fury, and the skin around its bulging veins took on an ugly purplish-red colour.

Ami would have taken an involuntary step back, had she not been a heap of misery on the floor. She wondered if the man was having a seizure. There was foam coming from his mouth!

"MUKREZAAAAR!" the Avatar howled like a blood-thirsty animal, and then his crystal ball went black.

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Mukrezar's Return (DARK)

Originally on 2011-05-19T02:08:00

Ami twitched on the ground, feeling the coldness of the gondola's floor bite into her right cheek. Her heart was beating rapidly, but despite the adrenaline racing through her veins, her jelly-like arms did no marshal enough strength to get up. Mukrezar. Crowned Death had revived the Keeper who had been responsible for wiping out the Avatar Islands! Nevertheless, Ami felt nothing but relief at the news. She couldn't have handled a second horror like that death spectre in her current state. Keepers were at least a known quantity.

"Bwahahaha, didn't think I'd ever hear the Avatar go berserk like that," Keeper Midori's voice came from the covered crystal ball. "So that *really* was Mukrezar. I didn't see that one coming, but I bet so did nobody else. Got to go, have to sell the news before it's old, time's money, you know how it is," the Keeper said cheerfully. "Don't worry, I won't forget about asking for my payment later!"

Ami didn't waste effort on a response. Instead, she used her Keeper powers to lift herself off the ground and used the suit of black armour lying next to her as an improvised seat. Her body cried out for sleep, but she couldn't give in. She wasn't done here yet, not by a long shot. Her Keeper sight dove into the underground and easily found the weak captives lying in their own filth in the corridors, flinching away even from the soft footsteps of her imps passing by. Silent tears ran down the blue-haired girl's face when she spotted a blind child fumble around with tiny, shaking hands and calling out for her mother. If anything, defeating the bad guys had been the easy part. Exhausted from the combat or not, she had to provide help to all those people trapped in the catacomb-like tunnels below.

Tiger appeared in a column of earth that disintegrated into rapidly fading pebbles with a grinding noise. "Whoa, you look like something that clawed its way out of the grave and started shambling around," the youma commented. "Good thing, I brought our healer, isn't it?" She opened her arms, letting the red-and-white

clad acolyte drop to the ground.

Snyder looked back and forth between the two blue-haired females, his brow scrunching up in confusion. The incomprehension on his rounded features faded away when he finally recognised the pale girl sitting hunched-over on Mercury's black suit of armour. "You, you are Mercury in her non-powered state. However, that would make you," he looked back over his shoulder at the disguised youma, "an imposter?"

Tiger shrugged, reverting to her own appearance. "More like a double. Now fix what's wrong with her, she looks as if a slight breeze could blow her over."

"The accuracy of that mimicry is rather unsettling," the acolyte commented. He approached Ami. "Empress, are you injured?"

"I'm not hurt, only exhausted. Conserve your power for helping the captives," the schoolgirl replied, her voice strained and quivering from fighting back her tears. "They are worse off than me."

"We shall see about that," Jadeite said, his voice arriving before his body as he shimmered into sight at her side. The dark general bowed down and put a hand on the blue-haired girl's shoulder, staring intently at her the whole time. "You are suffering from severe energy drain," he diagnosed. "I'm surprised you managed to stay awake for so long. What caused this?"

"That's not important right now," Ami said, her voice almost inaudible. Energy drained? Perhaps she could fix that problem. "Mercury Power, Make up," she breathed tentatively, which was enough to initiate her transformation sequence. In an instant, blue streamers and light gathered around her, leaving her clad in her uniform.

She felt invigorated by the transformation removing dirt, sweat, and tears just as much as by the actual magical enchantments strengthening her. She was still far from fine, but with new power flowing into her, she no longer needed to concentrate just on keeping her eyes open. With a jerky movement of her hand, she started creating imps and sending them into the tunnels below.

"Snyder, I'm excavating a large, clean area to gather the victims in." The island's surface, being exposed to the elements and littered with stinking dead flesh, was no place for a field hospital. "I'll send you down there as soon as the terrain is claimed."

"While I have had extensive medical training, I fear that my stamina will not be up to the task of treating that many patients," the red-and-white robed man admitted.

"Focus on strengthening them, in that case. I will be joining you and treating injuries as soon as I have secured a supply of fresh water," Ami said. Which was something of an ironic problem, given that both she and Mareki could simply conjure the substance. Unfortunately, the liquid produced by either of them was unsuitable for drinking, since it would inevitably fade away after a while. That couldn't be good for the body that had ingested it. While the youma's water could at least be used to clean the prisoners, Ami's own was too cold for even that purpose. Not that she couldn't heat it, but why waste magic on something like that when it wouldn't solve the problem of drinking water. There were no sources of fresh water on the island, and the ocean around here was too salty to drink, not to mention thoroughly contaminated with rotting bits of carrion. Fortunately, Ami had already come up with a solution. Seawater and lightning spells were all she needed to turn one of the huge, airtight tarpaulins intended for airship repair into a hydrogen-filled balloon. Not cost-effective in the least, but burning the gas would produce pure, clean, and real water for the prisoners to drink.

"Avatar? Avatar Amadeus?" Ami focused on the black crystal ball that the man had been using earlier, all the while transporting clean water into an ice-lined basin she had created underground.

The crystal ball lit up, but instead of the champion of Light, a harried-looking old face showed up. "You! I should have known you were involved somehow! What did you tell the Avatar to make him run off like that?" The secretary's eyes glanced sideways when a door slammed in the distance, followed by a faint splintering noise. "Never mind that, I've got more important things to do than rant at a Keeper!" She dropped the scrying device back on her desk as she stood up and hurried toward the door.

"Wait!" Ami called out, but it was too late. The crystal ball went black, cutting her off from the one person with enough trust and influence on the surface to send assistance. "Darn it!" Her shoulders slumped. Oh well, she could always try again later. Right now, there were people who needed her help. She gulped, since she was now faced with the prospect of judging the state of each of the hungry captives and deciding who would receive help first, and who would need to suffer for a while longer. This wasn't how she had imagined working as a doctor would be like.

Mukrezar appeared in a swirling vortex of red light, his long, pink mane wafting around him like a cape. He stood still for a moment and then fell over like a felled tree. His chin hit the marble floor with a dull thud. Interrupted by occasional dry heaves, he cussed up a storm while he patted down his naked body with his hands. After a while, he was satisfied that everything was still attached and where it belonged, and his stomach started to calm down. "Note to self: vampire teleportation is unsuited for living elves." He wondered what other unpleasant surprises were hidden away in the arcane lore that Crowned Death had crammed - painfully - into his head before tossing him back into this world. That new type of dungeon heart sounded intriguing...

A huge shadow, almost as broad as it was tall, moved across the mildewy wall as its owner approached with quiet footsteps. The being that stepped into the weak torchlight was much shorter and less imposing than the menacing shadow it cast. An eyebrow rose curiously over half-lidded, fist-sized imp eyes. "Master Mukrezar?" a surprisingly deep and cultivated voice asked.

The pink-haired elf lying on the ground looked up and frowned, unsurprised at being addressed by a talking imp in a tailored suit. "Who else would know about this little hidey-hole?" he snapped. He blinked twice when the imp got closer to the light and he could see it properly. "You grew a beard?"

The imp took his hand off the tiny rapier at his hip and moved a finger across the black tuft of hair adorning his chin. "It has been fifteen years, Master," he said, tilting his head to the side. "Fifteen years without being kicked, stomped on, set on fire, stabbed, chased by your pets, bitten, electrified, poisoned, poked, and being

punished for slights I did not commit." The imp took a deep breath, slowly walking closer. An odd gleam entered its huge black eyes. "Fifteen utterly peaceful years," the tiny servant continued, now looming before the weakened Keeper. The imp-butler's face was hidden in shadow except for the white of his crooked teeth. Suddenly, he continued in a high-pitched whine "It was horrible, your Heinousness! I missed you, Master!"

"If you hug me, I will boil your toes," Mukrezar warned, his face wary.

"A show of affection? From me?" The imp shuddered, his voice full of disdain. "You insult my professional standards."

"Yes, yes. Now be a good professional and bring me some clothes, will you?" Mukrezar ordered, making a shooing motion with his right hand. He pulled himself to his feet and gave the room a once over. His servant certainly hadn't raised a hand to stave off the ravages of time.

"Of course, your Maliciousness." The imp strode over to a chest, stood on tiptoes so he could see inside, and started rummaging within. "If I may ask, what was being dead like?"

"It is an experience that I would warmly recommend to all of my enemies," Mukrezar quipped.

"How droll." The imp draped a neatly-folded burgundy pair of trousers over his arm. "I do confess to some curiosity about how you managed to claw your way back to life."

"Crowned Death," Mukrezar looked left and right, as if expecting the dark god to burst from the shadows at the mention of his name, "saw it fit to reconstruct my body, shove my soul into it, and leave me some vague orders."

"Orders, your Rebelliousness? What kind of hold does he have over you?"

"Well, I would have to be a completely black-hearted fiend to not feel some gratitude and loyalty to someone who raised me from the

dead and returned my soul, wouldn't I?"

"Ah, I see." The small butler nodded. "I shall go collect a few pamphlets from the others priesthoods at once."

"First, clothe me," Mukrezar commanded. "Afterwards, we shall have to acquire some funds. I am a Keeper with no dungeon heart. This must not stand. You still have your pick, do you?"

"It would be faster to just request some funds from the death cult, Master," the imp said, straightening the lapels of the Keeper's jacket.

"And deal with the endless sermons about the beauty of death, the end of existence, and the blight that is life again? While I can appreciate the artistry of the torment it inflicts on a captive audience, I am less appreciative of this happening to myself. Let me tell you, that nonsense is especially jarring when you are already dead." Mukrezar stepped in front of a full-body mirror, snipped his fingers to peel the dust off its surface, and admired his reflection. "If their lord likes death so much, then he should just kill himself. But no, he hates all life so much that he needs to make sure it is all gone before he can enjoy sweet oblivion. Excuses, excuses." He turned back to his butler. "In any case, serving him has no future in the long run."

"And if there is something you are good at, Master, it is thinking about the long term."

The elf glowered at him. "Just because I can't afford to punish you right now does not mean I will not happily squish you like a bug later."

"As you say, your Torturousness. Maybe you could extort some gold from your subordinate Keepers, then? They have grown fat, lazy, and cautious in your absence. True disgraces to the cause of Evil."

"Unfortunately for me and fortunately for them, death thoroughly severed those bonds. Now start digging, and tell me about how the world changed while I was out of action."

Ami walked quickly through the hall filled with constant sobs and

moans, taking care to remain on claimed land at all times so her presence stabilised her local territory. Her face fell when the injured peasant woman before her curled up into a shivering ball at the sound of her approach. "Please don't be afraid," the blue-haired girl said, gently reaching out for the woman's shoulder. "The monsters who abducted you were defeated. I'm here to treat your injuries. Please, let me help you. There are many other patients who require assistance, too." As she waited for the woman to lower the arm held protectively over the wound above her left hip, Ami watched her imps run around, carrying water to those who needed it in small ice bottles. She heard splashes from the back, where ice golems were cleaning some of the saved people.

Now and again, the loud, metallic stomping of a reaperbot on patrol caused the complaints and the pained murmuring of the rescued sacrifices to become quieter and more frightened. Unfortunately, the patrols were necessary. Who knew how many of those teleporting priests Crowned Death still had in reserve?

The woman nodded almost imperceptibly and allowed Ami to access her injury. The future medical doctor saw that the wound encrusted with old, congealed blood was a simple cut, swollen with a badly-smelling infection.

The woman jerked when Ami brushed away the contaminated flesh far faster and more recklessly than she would have done under less pressing circumstances. "Ow! What are you doing?" she complained when fresh blood started oozing from the wound.

"I'm sorry," Ami apologised, "I do not have traditional healer training, so I could not dull the pain first." With a quick spell, she indiscriminately killed the bacteria around the cut and then knitted the flesh together.

The woman, who had gasped at the admission, turned her blinded face toward where she suspected the younger woman was. "Then what kind of healer are you?"

"Can't chat now, I need to treat the other patients," Ami excused herself as she hurried over to a muscular man clad in rags lying at the woman's side. If there was one thing she didn't want, it was

scaring the terrified victims even more by revealing her identity. A blind boy was hiding behind the soldier, small arms wrapped around the blood-stained larger torso.

"There are imps around," the man accused when Ami leaned over him. His upper body showed old combat scars. "I may be blind, but I'd recognise their footsteps everywhere! I'm not sure what you are trying to pull, but there's still a Keeper around. If you really wanted to help us, you'd just let us die before they can hurt us more!"

"Please be quiet, you are scaring the others," Ami said, wincing. "Nobody is going to hurt you."

"As if I'd believe anyone working for a Keeper," he snorted. "You stay the hell away from me!"

"I do not work for a Keeper," Ami protested truthfully. "Unfortunately, I cannot waste time trying to convince you, since other patients require my help, too. Call me if you change your mind," she continued as she turned away. She hated being so cold, but what else could she do in this situation? What she hated even more was how little she could actually do herself to alleviate these people's misery. Her necromancy could provide first aid, but it couldn't do anything about lost eyes. Her hands clenched into fists as she passed two tiny girls pressing themselves against the wall, their eyelids hanging loose over the hollows underneath.

"We have a problem," Jadeite announced himself as he shimmered into sight. Draped over his right shoulder, he carried the still form of Snyder.

Ami's eyes widened. "What happened to him?"

"He pushed himself too far," the dark general explained, "so he just keeled over. He'll need a while to recover."

Ami hung her head, her blue bangs falling over eyes that were reddened not only from the crimson light they emitted. "I- I can't handle this alone!"

"I have a suggestion," Jadeite said. "You remember that flash of

lightning out over the ocean during the battle?"

"Dandel! Hey, Dandel!" Anise said, poking the back of her indigo-haired older sister with her index finger. "Have you figured out what those two balloon-things are doing yet?" The redhead pointed at the two elongated airships hanging low over the ocean's surface, almost invisible in the night. "We have been following them over an hour now!"

"I think so, yes," the exasperated fairy leader answered as she put down her telescope. "Fishing."

"Fishing?" The fae with twin short swords affixed to her belt blinked.

"Well, there's a huge net spanning the distance between them, which they dipped into the sea and are now dragging behind themselves," Dandel explained.

"How huge are we talking here?" Camilla's wanted to know. The blonde stared out at the dark ocean with a worried expression. "Giant octopus huge?"

"No, it would be far to flimsy for something like that," the eldest sister said with a calming smile. "There's no need to worry. Melissa will warn us about anything approaching underwater."

"But apparently not from elsewhere," a menacing male voice sounded from behind their.

As one, the startled fairies took to the air, the glitter from their wings describing glowing arcs in the darkness as they whirled to face the voice. Seven sets of rainbow-coloured eyes focused on the grey-uniformed figure hovering not far away.

"It's you!" Green-haired Tilia shouted.

"Have you finally decided to run away from the Keeper?" Camilla asked with more optimism than she really felt.

"What do you want?" Dandel asked, wings fluttering in a pattern that would allow her to dart aside at a moment's notice.

"My Empress wants to see you," Jadeite answered simply.

"Yeah, right. Why should we care?" Anise spat, her swords drawn.

"Is there a healer among you?" the dark general continued, ignoring the redhead.

"Are you hurt?" Melissa asked, some of the wariness fading from her expression.

"Or are you going to hurt one of us and abduct her so we *have* to follow you back to the island if we say yes?" Cerasse suspected, bringing up the spiralling bone staff she had found into a combat-ready position.

"Not a bad plan," Jadeite said, as if actually considering it.

"Was the dark empress wounded during the fighting?" Roselle wanted to know, not bothering to disguise her hopeful expression.

"No, she is simply feeling a bit sick from eating something that disagreed with her," Jadeite replied, a hint of amusement playing around his eyes. "In any case, you will be coming with me one way or another."

"To think that such a handsome face could hide such a rotten attitude," Cerasse said. "Anyway, with me having this," she raised the three-pronged staff, "you won't be able to lay a hand on us!"

"Oh, please. Empress Mercury defeated twelve ancient sorcerers wielding those staves during the battle." The curly-haired blond waved a white-gloved hand dismissively.

"But you aren't her," Anise pointed out, a dangerous gleam in her ruby eyes.

"Please, can't you reconsider your evil ways?" Tilia pleaded. "We don't have to fight!"

"But if we do, we are going to kick your arse! You may be powerful, but you will not be able to stand against all seven of us," Roselle declared.

"Ah, it's a good thing I am the distraction, then," Jadeite stated with a smug grin. It widened when the alarmed fairies instantly took a defensive formation, their eyes darting around as they scanned for the real threat. Which was when he hit them with a gust of air that sent them tumbling and off-balance, though they recovered quickly. He even had to dodge a pulsing ball of blue energy that came at him with surprising accuracy when taking into account that his indigo-haired attacker was currently upside down. Chuckling, he raised both hands in a grabbing motion.

"Gah!" Melissa let out a startled yelp when her flying carpet darted out from underneath her, rolling itself up as it sped toward the dark general. From the corner of her sapphire eyes, she could see the second carpet do the same.

Jadeite caught both rolls, gave a mocking bow in the direction of his stunned and dismayed opponents, and disappeared with a violet flash of upwards-shooting lines.

"He- he stole our flying carpets! That thief!" Camilla sputtered, her cheeks puffed up in anger.

"I'm sure Mercury put him up to it!" Roselle added.

"This is a problem," Dandel sighed, hanging her head. "We can't make it back to the ship without them. Getting back to the island will be exhausting enough." Using the star-lit sky as a guide, she looked toward the east, where Dreadfog Island lay hidden somewhere behind the horizon.

A transparent and larger-than-life image of Jadeite flickered into existence before her. The dark general ignored the death glares shot his way and said "You have no choice but to return to the island now. Since my Empress means you no harm-"

"Hah!"

"-you may travel on the two returning airships. I shall be seeing you soon."

"So, Zarekos was defeated by a relatively unknown Keeper,"

Mukrezar mused, sitting on a boulder. He was talking loud enough to make himself heard over the noise of a pick striking rock. "Not sure why she would bother, though. Anyway, I'd have loved to destroy him myself, but what's done is done. Oh well. So this Keeper Mercury now holds my lands?"

The butler, covered in rock dust, nodded.

"I can't forgive her for undoing the results of my brilliance! All that plotting and scheming to remove the Avatar from the picture permanently, wasted!" Mukrezar grumbled, crossing his arms.

"You are referring to the time you were bedridden for a week after trying to eat his soul?" the bearded imp commented. "Ah, those sores were some of the best I have ever seen, and I fancy myself something of a connoiss-"

"Shut up."

"Surely, you were talking about his corrupted mantle setting you on fire after you tried to claim its power, then?"

"Shut up!"

"But Master, how could I keep quiet about your genius plan to circumvent what remained of his defences by possessing his body? Never before have I seen dragons so traumati-"

"Continue talking, and I might actually feel motivated enough to research a way to get rid of you for good," Mukrezar threatened, and a vein above his right eyebrow twitched. He cleared his throat. "Ahem. While there were a few false starts-"

"A few?"

"-*that shall never be mentioned again*, I did manage to neutralise him for good eventually. Or at least until that dimwit of a Keeper allowed him to undo my transmutation, ruining all of my hard work!"

The digging imp swung his pick at the rock, giggling. "By providing an opportunity for him to recover his mantle, yes."

"*What?"* Mukrezar cussed loudly and at great length, hammering the wall with his fist. When the limb was bloody, he finally slowed down. "Of all the stupid, disastrous outcomes! Well, at least she got to reap the fatal consequences her incredible incompetence has sowed!"

"Indeed, Master. The Avatar immediately went after her, wearing his mantle, and she faced him in," the bearded imp paused to spit at the ground in disgust, "*honourable single combat.*"

Mukrezar groaned and rubbed his temples. "How did an idiot like that manage to survive that long?"

"By being powerful enough to take out the Avatar with a single spell, apparently," the butler said in an even voice.

"Impossible! You said he was wearing his mantle!" Mukrezar jumped to his feet, flailing his hands wildly. "It can't be done! He is-" He stopped and glared down at the top of the imp's bald skull. "You wouldn't have happened to grow a sense of humour while I was away, would you?" he asked suspiciously. "Teasing me like that. I will-"

"The events I reported were confirmed by several independent sources."

Mukrezar sat back down on a rock, resting his head in his hands. "You are not having me on?"

The imp shook his head.

Mukrezar remained quiet for a while and then sighed. "I suppose a little forgiveness, only once, won't hurt." He perked up. "At least, there is one silver lining to this. That disgustingly holy champion of the Light remains a non-issue!"

His butler opened his mouth, only to remain quiet when the former Keeper's hand shot up in a halting gesture.

"No, wait, don't say anything. Let me guess. She let him go."

"Actually, she ransomed him back in exchange for being named the rightful Empress of the lands by the Light gods, but close enough.

How did you know, Master?"

"Rightful Empre-" The elf threw up his hands in the air. "You know what, stop talking about her. It's too depressing. As to how I knew... well, letting lose an uncontrollable, unstoppable death machine that isn't a danger to me personally is just what I would have done!" Mukrezar said. Suddenly, he paled. "Damn! Damn damn damn damn! He's going to come after me!" he started pacing up and down rapidly, beads of sweat forming on his brow.

"He might be harbouring some unreasonable resentment for your redecoration of that unsightly green eyesore he called his country, yes," the butler agreed. His face and tone remained impassive, but the corners of his wide mouth twitched.

"Then dig faster! We must prepare!" Mukrezar squeaked, delivering a kick to the imp's backside as an additional encouragement.

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Getting More Nurses

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A loud smacking noise rang through the cargo hold, followed by an outraged scream. Startled by the noise, Melissa looked up from her blue-haired reflection in the water-filled bowl before her. She saw Anise holding a large, slippery fish in her right hand while rubbing a wet spot on the back of her head with the other.

The red-faced redhead shot a glare at a snickering imp standing on top of a hill of recently-caught sea creatures, her teeth bared in a furious snarl. "That's it, you little bastard," she shouted, swinging the dead animal by its tail fin as if she was imagining beating the coverall-clad worker to death with it. "You are so going to get it now!" With a flutter of her wings, she took off and shot toward the nuisance.

The imp's eyes widened, and she let out a squeak that sounded a lot like "Uh oh." With some quick rummaging, she extracted a rounded shape from the slippery heap and flung it at the rapidly-approaching fairy.

Anise dodged the snapping pincers of the lobster with an elegant swerve to the right and kept coming, prompting the imp to dart away.

Melissa shook her head and tried to tune out the noise of her sister chasing the impudent little creature around the gondola. She glanced down at the bowl of water before her, but couldn't marshal the inner calm required to work her scrying magic. This vessel was bringing them straight to the dark empress, who had defeated the Avatar himself. What could she and her sisters do to defend themselves against her? Certain captivity waited at the end of this journey. She flinched at the unbidden mental picture of herself and her sisters manacled to a wall while a hooded figure heated knives over a coal fire. Sure, nothing like that had happened the last time, but Mercury *was* a Keeper, empress or not. Melissa shivered. "Dandel, how are we going to get out of this one?"

The indigo-haired fairy stood at the front window and looked outside in the direction of Dreadfog Island. She turned around, sighing. "I don't know. We'll have to find our carpets and make a run for it when the opportunity presents itself, I suppose."

"Shouldn't we be doing something instead of just letting ourselves be led like lambs to the slaughter?" Melissa asked.

"It's better we arrive well-rested," the eldest of the fairy sisters explained. "We'll jump off this craft only when we are close to the island; otherwise we'll be too tired to fight."

"Gyah!" Anise shouted somewhere behind Melissa. Judging by the splattering sounds, she had just discovered the rest of the imps with their buckets full of fish guts. "You filthy little- Ack!"

"Maybe it won't be that bad?" Roselle said, letting her legs dangle off the roll of tarpaulin she was sitting on. "Last time, she didn't treat us too badly."

"Ack! Anise! I was just done cleaning that!" Cerasse's irate voice echoed through the cabin from behind the group. The purple-haired fairy stared in dismay at the mess that had moments before been her personal island of cleanliness and order in the chaos that was the cargo hold.

"Aside from that gross tentacle monster," Melissa commented. She couldn't understand how her cleanliness-obsessed sister could stand the slimy thing.

"The decent treatment is what worries me," Dandel said. "We got away last time before she could implement her plans. Given the scope and unpredictability of her last great scheme, I'm *really* worried about what she wants us for."

The orange-haired fairy shrugged her shoulders. "I don't think there's much harm she could do with us seven. It's not as if we were high-ranked or knew important secrets. This might be more her looking for entertainment."

"Not reassuring, Roselle. Not reassuring at all! Have you forgotten

about her reputation?" Melissa said. She suddenly wished her uniform was more covering.

"She is looking for a healer," Camilla reminded them. The young blonde was sitting cross-legged on the floor, curling and relaxing her toes rapidly, which Melissa recognised as a sign of nervousness. "Do you think we should help her?"

The sounds of something metal toppling over came from behind the group. "You can help her to an early grave if she lets you get that close," Anise's voice drifted over from behind the group, changing position as rapidly as the excited squeals of the imps.

"Anise, stop picking on the imps," Dandel ordered when a fiery orange glow flared up behind the hill of fish.

"*I'm* picking on *them*?" the redhead's incredulous voice protested. A spinning piece of fish innards briefly crested the obstruction. "Eww! I'll kill you little creeps!"

Melissa felt space warp, and her blue eyes shot open. "Scatter!" she shrieked, already moving when a hand made of water as tall as she was popped into existence.

The disembodied limb made a grab for Dandel, who folded up her wings and cartwheeled backwards, narrowly avoiding the swipe. Undeterred, the hand rose upwards and gave chase until a blast from the left turned it into a cloud of droplets.

"Hah, how's that?" Cerasse asked with a triumphant smile, lowering the battle staff of Calarine she was wielding by a few degrees.

"Behind you!" Melissa warned, too late to save the purple-haired fae from the hail of fish pelting her back.

With weak battle cries, the imps charged down the hill, launching themselves at the stumbling girl and climbing all over her.

Distracted by the sight, Melissa only noticed the second hand that had appeared when its wet coldness enveloped her. Through the liquid covering her eyes, she saw Cerasse in a tug of war over the battle staff with no less than four of the vaguely female imps. She

felt a brief squeezing sensation, and her surroundings changed.

Water splashed when a giant hand appeared within the dimly lit-room, opened, and dropped its prisoner to the ground. Melissa immediately dashed over to her thoroughly drenched sister, grabbed her wrist, and pulled her to her feet. "Cerasse! Are you all right?"

The purple-haired fairy coughed up some water. "The indignity! Those terrible little imps!" she sputtered. An red mark in the shape of a fish covered her right cheek. "My precious, beautiful staff," she lamented.

"See? They are evil little things. You should have let me teach them a lesson," the voice of an angry and dripping wet redhead intruded.

"Anise, she got you too?" Cerasse asked, blinking at the ruby-eyed fairy who was wrapping her arms around herself and whose skin was covered in goosebumps from the cold. She started pouting when she spotted the twin swords at the redhead's belt, which the dark empress obviously had not deemed a threat.

"She got all of us," Dandel's tense voice answered from the shadows. She and the other fairies were standing guard near the single empty doorway leading into the chamber, through which large, horned shadows fell into the room.

Melissa scratched with her fingernails over the engraving of a stylized skull on the wall. "Nope, can't find any secret doors or traps," she reported. "I still think we should take our chances with those stupid-looking metal guards."

"Please don't," a female voice from outside requested. An ice golem clad in a black leotard and a short blue skirt strode past the hulking forms of the reaperbots. Crimson eyes swept over the seven women in the cell, who gasped and took combat stances.

"Empress Mercury!" Roselle said, making it sound like an accusation.

"What do you want from us?" Dandel asked, stepping protectively in

front of the group.

"Dandel," Melissa whispered, "be more respectful. She *is* an empress." She hoped the Keeper wouldn't do anything horrible to her elder sister for the perceived disrespect. The blue-haired fairy would have considered the menacing red glow in the golem's eyes intimidating even if she hadn't had an intuitive understanding of human body language. Out of the movements of the surprisingly lifelike statue, she could read that empress Mercury was feeling rather frustrated and angry about something right now, and probably eager to lash out. Melissa swallowed and hoped that the more impulsive of her sisters would behave themselves. Silently, she shuffled closer to Anise and Roselle so that she could intervene if necessary.

"I want you to heal someone. Follow me, please," empress Mercury said. Fortunately, she didn't seem offended. "I apologise for bringing you here like this, but I could not simply wait for the airships' arrival and transported you as soon as you were in range."

Melissa stared at the back of the ice statue that strode briskly toward the exit. Uncertain about what to do, she glanced over at Dandel and noticed Tilia and Camilla do the same.

Noticing Melissa's stare, the eldest sister shrugged and took a step forward, following the dark empress. With their leader having reached a decision, the other girls fell into step behind her, glancing around nervously as the automatons parted before them.

What could they do but follow, anyway? They were deep underground in a dark, unknown, and cold dungeon, their drenched wings malleable and clinging to their scantily-clad bodies.

Camilla sneezed, prompting Mercury to look back over her shoulder. "Oh, you must be freezing," she said, sounding distracted. She raised a gloved hand, and a few sections of rough grey fabric appeared in the air in front of the fairies. "I don't have any proper towels around here, but this should help. Feel free to keep them."

Melissa remained suspicious of the nice gesture, but not suspicious enough to remain cold and wet. Cloth rustled as she and the other

girls dried themselves off while following their captor. With her sight momentarily obstructed by the fabric when she dried her short hair, she followed the others by sound alone. Were those moans in the distance? "Excuse me," she said, alarmed. "All the remaining undead around here are yours, right?"

"No." The empress' lips tightened into a thin line. "I do not raise undead creatures," she added with unexpected vehemence.

Melissa wondered if she had accidentally hit upon a sore spot and ducked her head, trying to make herself a smaller target. Silently, she continued worrying about the moans. With her gaze downcast, she almost missed the group entering a new room. Fortunately, the clattering footsteps of the golem stopped, which alerted her before she bumped into someone. She looked around and wasn't reassured at all by the motionless figure lying on a few folds of fabric in the corner, dressed in a red and white acolyte's robe. *Used up and discarded,* she thought. Sapphire eyes focused on her youngest sister, and she feared that the Keeper was planning the same fate for the blonde healer.

A snort from the other corner of the room drew her gaze to the tall figure she had at first mistaken for a large mummy. But no, its chest was moving up and down slowly. She took a closer look. Was that red skin visible between bandages at points? And up there, horns! A horned reaper! Instinctively, she backed away from the murderous demon, even though it probably couldn't even move in its current state. Old rumours about the Empress that she had previously dismissed returned to her mind with insisting urgency.

Camilla had followed her gaze, and her yellow eyes widened. "You-you want us to heal your pet over there?"

The Mercury-golem looked puzzled. "Rabixtrel? No, he'll heal fine on his own." She pulled aside a makeshift curtain, revealing a door frame carved to resemble skeletal arms. "I want you to help me save *them*!" she said, pointing through the gap.

Melissa couldn't help gasping as she spotted the rows upon rows of people on the ground. She was sure there were more in the darkness not reached by the light spilling from the doorway. So the

pained moans came from here! The fairy felt her stomach lurch when she got a better look at the faces. "Their eyes. They have no eyes!"

"I'm going to be sick," Roselle said in a queasy voice, muffled by her left hand pressed over her mouth.

"That's monstrous!" Anise shouted. "How could you do something like that to them?" Her hands were on the grips of her swords, and she looked ready to lunge at the dark empress, expendable ice body or no.

"I am *not* responsible for this!" Empress Mercury snapped back, sounding angry enough that the redhead retreated a step. "I destroyed the death priests who wanted to use them as sacrifices!"

"Eep!"

Melissa hadn't seen Camilla move, but she must have, because she was now peeking out cautiously from behind Dandel's wings. The blue-haired fairy admitted to herself that the Keeper's lamp-like red glare was terrifying to behold. "She didn't mean it!" she heard herself blurt out, having stepped in front of Anise protectively without consciously thinking about it.

The dark empress straightened her posture as she regained her composure. Her expression almost pleading, she said "Just- please help them. There are too many of them for me to treat on my own. Ignore their eyes for the moment, stabilising them so that they don't die is the most important thing right now."

"What's wrong with them?" Camilla asked, her voice steadier than Melissa had expected after seeing her take cover behind her eldest sister.

"My imps are dealing with the dehydration and hunger issues right now," the statue stated, gesturing towards the tiny servants running around with trays. The aroma of cooked fish mixed with the smell of unwashed, frightened humans. "Complications from the eye injuries are the main issue, but most of the healthy adults are not in immediate danger. The younger children and those who were

injured when they were captured however..." Mercury trailed off, her grim face bringing across her meaning adequately. "I brought the ones most in need of help closest, to this door, just proceed down the rows. You will help, yes?" She leaned forward and whispered "Also, please don't mention my name. The additional excitement would be detrimental to their health."

"All right," Camilla said, taking charge. "I'm the healer of our group. I'll help, but since you obviously need us, I want something in return first!" the shortest of the fairies challenged the possessed simulacrum.

"You want to hold the lives of these people hostage?" Sailor Mercury replied, sounding surprised and thoroughly displeased.

The round-cheeked blonde winced, but stood her ground. "It's our only chance to get out of here! You don't expect us to just give up, do you?"

Melissa could hear a slight squeaky undertone in the blonde's voice, but it was so well-hidden that she doubted the Keeper could perceive it. Camilla had to be scared out of her mind, but she was facing down one of the most powerful creatures of darkness anyway.

"I would have let-" the dark empress began, but stopped. "Fine, let's not waste vital time with arguing. What do you want?"

"I want our magic carpets back and freedom for the others! I'm the only healer of our group, so they are no use to you!"

"Camilla, this is not a good-" Cerasse tried to interrupt, but her sister ignored her.

"Well?" she asked, her arms akimbo as she stared straight into the dark empress' crimson eyes.

Melissa was so proud of her little sister that she wanted to hug her. At the same time, she felt like slapping the blonde repeatedly for trying something so outrageously dangerous. Watching with bated breath, she absently noticed that the ice statue was no taller than

the blonde. How odd. In her mind, the dark empress had been taller.

"I can't fault you for wanting to save your comrades," Keeper Mercury said after a moment. "Very well, it's a deal." Two rolled-up carpets dropped into the young fairies's arms. "Now *please* go-" she trailed off and blinked when the spot she was looking at was suddenly empty.

A loud "Eeehhh?" came from the sick bay, and everyone turned to stare at the winged girl who had appeared next to the closest patient, holding two carpet rolls.

"What happened?" Camilla asked, a question that was mirrored by the empress' confused expression.

"Camilla, you poor fool," Cerasse said, shaking her head. "That's what I wanted to warn you about. You offered to work for her, she accepted, you took her payment," the purple-haired fae lectured. "In short, you got yourself hired."

"What? Noooooo!" the appalled blonde wailed, her yellow eyes huge.

"Human shields," Baron Leopold declared, slamming a fist on the polished wooden table and rattling the wine glasses on the elongated piece of furniture. "That's the reason she is caring for those soldiers."

The assembled councillors and nobles exchanged concerned glances. "Your Majesty?" One of them asked, addressing the crowned figure sitting at the head of the table.

"I concur with that assessment," the hooded figure standing in King Albrecht's shadow replied in the monarch's place. "Our informants suggest that her ships are at least partially floating due to interaction with the air. That would make them vulnerable to the elves' crashing spell. She needs the hostages to guard against that form of attack."

"In that case, we must warn her that we will shoot her vessels down if she approaches our coast, hostages or not," a greying noble with

a high forehead and a thin moustache said. "Those people were dead the moment they fell into Keeper hands; the fact that still draw breath is but a detail!"

"Baron Mildorn! Surely you aren't suggesting that we kill those innocent people!"

"Calm yourself, councillor. I suggest nothing of the sort. I fully support recovering our abducted subjects alive and well, and as soon as we can. However, the evil empress will not know that we are bluffing. She is a Keeper, and such reasoning will make sense to such a black-hearted fiend."

"What do we do if she calls our bluff?" another councillor called out.

"Then," King Albrecht said, "we shall try our best to save those hostages once her vessels are within reach." He took a deep sip of wine from his glass. "For now, I have instructed the wizard guilds to strengthen our air defences." He sat up straighter as he put down his drink and smoothed the ermine seam of his robe. "Unfortunately, the antics of Empress Mercury are not our only concern at the moment. An even more disturbing piece of news has reached me."

"Your Majesty, how could it be more disturbing than the dark empress' machinations? She can transport an army strong enough to take out an established dungeon over the ocean in less than a week! That's terrifying! Even if she leaves us alone, another Keeper aping her achievement and deploying a fast-moving raiding force could be a disaster!"

"The Avatar recently burst into my throne room, much to the dismay of my guards," Albrecht began, smiling as he saw the entire council lean forward, following his words with interest. "He informed me, using most uncouth turns of phrase, that Keeper Mukrezar is back from the dead, resurrected by the dark god Crowned Death with an unrepeatable ritual." He paused to wait for the inevitable noise that would follow his words, and was not disappointed when the room erupted with exclamations and questions.

"Mukrezar, eh? I wouldn't mind putting a sword through that bastard's stomach, myself," Baron Leopold's voice boomed, his

huge moustache quivering with every word he spoke.

"Silence, please," the King continued. "Furthermore, the Avatar asked me to put a bounty on the villain's head as a personal favour. I gladly complied. However, dear Amadeus must have been presenting this issue to other heads of state too. As the Silver Hawks informed me, the current total price on Mukrezar's head is over two million gold pieces."

In the ensuing silence, the buzzing of a fly seemed overly loud. Someone let out an impressed whistle. "That has to be the highest bounty on a single person in recorded history. For that amount of gold, every monster in the Underworld is going to hound him!"

"Especially the dragons!" someone else cheered.

Relieved chatter picked up in the hall as the nobles reassured each other that the bogeyman from the Avatar Islands would not be able to return to power.

"That's one problem that will correct itself," Baron Mildorn agreed with them. "My King, is there any information as to why Crowned Death, of all the dark gods, would bring Mukrezar back to life?"

Other dignitaries close to the man fell quiet, waiting with interest for Albrecht's reply.

"That part of the Avatar's report was rather unintelligible. He made it sound as if the Lesser Aspect that Crowned Death was originally intending to send through got itself devoured by the dark empress."

The King was forced to stop when the room, stunned into silence for an instant, exploded with noise. Questions shouted by red-faced councillors all at the same time made it impossible to understand any of them. Toppling chairs added to the noise level as people jumped to their feet and attempted to make themselves heard.

"Quiet! QUIET!" Albrecht ordered, to no avail. "Dumat!" He had to grip the sleeve of his court wizard to get him to take notice. With a few quick finger signs, he explained what he wanted.

Dumat nodded and raised his arms. A painfully loud thunderclap

rolled through the room, rattling the empty suits of armour near the walls and echoing between the pillars before it faded away.

"Ah, nothing like beating people over the head with sheer volume to quiet down a room," Albrecht commented while he removed his fingers from his ears. "Abbot, I will let you explain this."

An elderly man in gold-embroidered white robes leaned on his staff as he rose from his seat. For once, everyone was hanging onto his every word. "Ah, yes, your Majesty." He drew himself to his full height and cleared his throat. Using his preaching voice, he began "Fear not. As the Light assures me, Empress Mercury did at no point handle an intact, viable, or even significant fraction of the Lesser Aspect's power. What she did could be likened to putting a straw into a glass and sucking. Only the tiny bit of liquid coming out of the straw needs to be handled at any point in time. She was never facing the full power of the entity, but merely tiny portions that any prepared and competent wizard could have handled with the aid of the right wards."

The frightened faces around the table regained some colour as the holy man's explanation lifted their spirits.

"Guess she did us a favour there," Leopold grunted, "of course, she was saving her own skin there, first and foremost."

A dissenting voice cut through the relieved chatter, directed at the abbot. "But the Light does not contest that she *did* consume the entity's power, all of it, even if it took her some time?"

The elderly man blinked. "Uh, well, yes, I suppose she did?"

As shrieks and loud shouts echoed through the room once more, Albrecht sighed and lowered his head. He waved his court wizard closer. "Well, Dumat, how his your little summoning spell coming along? We might actually need to use it before it is too late."

The white-bearded man paled underneath his pointy blue hat.

"Jadeite, please be reasonable. The captives can't stay here! The

place it too cold, has no fresh water, and with all that rotting flesh around, it will only be a matter of time until diseases will make their lives hell!" Ami pleaded, looking into the dark general's steel-blue eyes.

"No. It's a stupid idea, and I refuse to help you with it."

Ami stared at Jadeite, her eyes wide. She felt betrayed. How could he? "Those people need help! Help that I can't give them! Help they can't get here!"

"Nevertheless, ferrying them over to the Light worshippers is out of the question. Going through all the trouble of keeping them alive and healthy and then just releasing them for free is not something a Keeper would do. Do you want more dark gods to send their followers after you?" The grey-uniformed man was presenting his arguments in a cold, unemotional tone of voice.

"But they are suffering! I can't look at all those blind children and not help them!" Ami insisted, her cheeks reddening with anger. The eyeless faces of the victims in the tunnels below haunted her. They would follow her into her nightmares, she was sure.

"Take them to our base and pretend to ransom them back, at least. Those humans being unable to see for a few weeks more or less doesn't matter one bit in the big picture, while you blowing your cover will ruin everything!" Jadeite shot back. He crossed his arms over his chest, narrowing his eyes as he met her glare.

"How can you be so heartless?" the blue-haired girl shouted, tears brimming in the corners of her eyes. Why couldn't he understand? Had she been so wrong about him?

"I'm simply being practical," he replied, raising his own voice too. "You are tired, overstressed, and recovering from almost killing yourself a short while ago! You are simply not thinking straight!"

"I'm not?" Her conviction wavered for a moment as she briefly considered going with his plan. Then, the memory of a little boy rubbing helplessly at the wounds that were his eye sockets flashed through her mind. His salty tears were making the injuries itch, and

the rubbing made them hurt worse in a vicious circle. Ami's determination returned. She would get a priest to make him happy again! Him and all the others! "Fine, I will just manage without you! It will be difficult, but with a three-to-two child to adult ratio, I should be able to lift them all with the airships, even without your magic. I'll just have to expand their envelopes with the remaining repair materials. I'm responsible for these people now, and I wont let them be hurt any more!"

"Until your overloaded airships hit a bad weather zone, crash, and kill everyone," Jadeite said, almost smirking as he poked a hole into her plan. "You *do* need my assistance if you want to move them!"

Ami's knuckles went white as her hands balled into fists. She had no comeback to that. Why, why, why was he doing this to her? "Jadeite! This is something I *need* to do! Help me with this!" she shouted.

"Ask anyone, it's the completely wrong thing to do!" the dark general shouted back. "I won't have a part in it, even if you order me to!"

Ami turned away as she felt hot tears on her cheeks and, hung her head. "Then get out of my sight," she ordered in a bitter whisper.

In Transit

Originally on 2011-06-01T22:31:00

Ami could feel her exhaustion catch up with her despite the golem body she was possessing. While it had no muscles or organs that could tire, the fatigue still rendered her thoughts sluggish and her movements mechanical. Being made of ice did have the advantage of not being able to perceive the smell permeating the airships, though. Even frequent ventilation could not get rid of the stench of too many people crammed into too little space.

Of course, that didn't help all the poor people she had transported onto her ship. Ami sighed as she walked past the unfortunates lying on the ground, packed like sardines in a can. She had to duck her head so she wouldn't bump into the low-hanging ceiling above. Not stepping on someone was becoming a challenge. Finding room for all these people on the vessels had required extensive remodelling and getting rid of anything that was not necessary. She had partitioned the cabin of each airship into six different floors, and her reaperbots were travelling on an ice floe she had created from ocean water with several applications of her Shabon Spray Freezing spell.

Despite the multiple available floors, space remained uncomfortably scarce. Even the children were barely able to move around on their assigned spots. The less said about the sanitation problems this posed, the better. Ami was glad that the imps would do any job with little complaint, no matter how dirty. They could also take over simple tasks, like bringing food and drink to the blinded patients, and were small enough to not be hindered too much by the claustrophobic conditions.

Ami lowered herself to one knee so that she could adjust the bandage covering a little brown-haired boy's eyes.

"Eep! Your hands are cold!" the child protested, shying away from the touch.

"Sorry about that. Don't scratch, it will make things worse." Ami gently pushed the small hands away from the bandages, and patted the child on the head reassuringly.

"Where is my momma? I want my momma!"

"I'm doing my best to find her," Ami said, glad that he couldn't see the sad expression on her face. "Now, where do you come from?"

She noted down the child's answer on her computer and went to the next patient. Finding out where people were from geographically and reuniting them was one of the few things she could do to ease their pain. Therefore, it was a project that she eagerly dedicated what little time she could spare to. Which wasn't a lot, given that she had to care for thousands of people almost on her own. In addition, she had to make sure that the airships groaning under their burden maintained a steady flight and didn't jerk or tilt to the side, frightening the passengers in the process. A panic breaking out within these cramped quarters would lead to hundreds of injured or dead. It was a nightmarish possibility. Without Jadeite's sleep spells and his magic supporting the dirigibles, it might already have happened by now.

Jadeite. Ami hung her head and stared at the floor. Disappointment stabbed like a knife at her heart whenever she thought about him. Yes, now that she had been able to dwell on the situation for some time, she realised that she was being unfair to him. Jered had supported the dark general's view too, stating that there was no way that the surfacers would let her reach their lands uncontested. If she tried anyway, she would be risking the lives of everyone on board. Nevertheless, she found it hard to forgive Jadeite for forcing her to put her own good over that of the many people she had rescued. It was irrational, but emotions didn't care about logic, and she had no way to simply turn them off.

Ami closed her eyes and gritted her teeth. Oh, he hadn't said anything, but he *knew* she couldn't leave the crippled hostages where they were any longer. Her only option had been going along with his suggestion. Even if he had meant well, getting her choice taken away like that hurt. She was almost glad that she would be drowning in work and be to distracted for idle musings during the

rest of the journey back to the Avatar Island. She did not want to think about him right now.

"Empress?" a reluctant whisper at her side startled her out of her task. She looked up and found the blonde fairy she had accidentally hired staring at her, pouting unhappily.

"Yes? Is something wrong?" Ami whispered back, wondering what Camilla wanted. The yellow-eyed girl was not pleased with her situation, but she was nevertheless a dedicated worker. Ami noted the dark circles around the fae's eyes, and decided that she would order her to take a break soon. She honestly didn't know how she would manage without her help, or without that of the other fairies who had decided to stick around.

"I'm wondering how you are treating their eyes," Camilla asked, moving closer so she could speak in a hushed voice. She gestured down at the patient surrounding them on all sides.

"Aside from the bandages, I haven't dared to touch them yet. I don't know how to regrow eyes, since I have no spell for it. It would be terrible if closing the wounds with necromancy now would make it impossible to restore the eyes later."

"You don't need to worry about that," the fairy said, a haunted look in her eyes.

Ami immediately realised that Camilla hadn't meant this as medical advice, and felt her stomach drop. "Is something wrong?"

"Um, no, nothing," the round-face girl said quickly, shaking her head. She turned around. "I'll be going back to work no-"

"Wait!" Ami might not be the best at social interaction, but the fairy was a horrible liar. "Out with it! If there's something seriously wrong with these people that I don't know about yet, then you have to tell me!"

"Ah, err," Camilla began when she suddenly found herself face to face with the dark empress again. Defiance played across her features before melting away in the glare of Mercury's crimson-

glowing eyes. "Um, you wouldn't throw them out of the airship or something if it turned out that they won't be as useful to you as you thought, right?"

"Of course not!" Ami protested. "I don't expect them to work for me. Most of them are children!"

"Promise?" The fairy took a deep breath when the golem before her nodded. Still looking worried, she continued "You really haven't noticed yet? The death priests must have used their ceremonial knives to pry out their eyes," the fairy whispered, looking queasy.

"I don't quite follow," Ami admitted, not getting the significance.

"Those tools were tainted by the many evil rites they were used in. Those are cursed wounds! I can't do anything about them!"

Ami gasped and would have paled had she been in her real body. Given the location of the injuries, cutting away the affected flesh was not an option. "But someone more powerful could? They aren't going to be stuck like this?"

"Someone like an abbot can break the curse on a wound within a temple, but he wouldn't be much good for a few days or so afterwards. Fixing the eyes with a regeneration spell later would be easy, though. I think you had one cast on your hand a while back," the blonde continued. She grimaced at the unpleasant memories this brought up.

Ami didn't need to be a genius to figure out that curing all of the injured could take up to years within those limitations. "Why does it take that long? Aren't the Light gods just as strong as the dark ones?" There went her plan of just asking for a proper healer or two to be sent over to her realm.

"Destroying is much easier than healing," Camilla said with a weary sigh. Suddenly, she looked nervous again. "So, um, you are still not going to harm the patients, right?"

"There has to be a better way," Ami said, more to herself than to the fairy. "And if there isn't, then I'll have to find one!" Maybe there was

a different approach to this that required a more scientific mindset? She'd have to analyse the curse first, to see how it prevented healing. Maybe it was meant to suppress magical healing only? Possibilities raced through her head. How was the evil magic maintained? Did it draw its power from an outside source, or did it leech from its victim like a parasite? She would-

A child started crying nearby, bringing Ami back to the present. Camilla was looking at her oddly, probably wondering why she had frozen up like that. The insisting complaints of the toddler pushed thoughts of developing a cure for cursed wounds back for the moment. Hurrying over to the child to see what she needed, Ami wished she was back at the Avatar Islands already so she could properly start her research.

The airships were moving too fast for a fairy to keep up with using only her wings, and so Dandel used her flying carpet to manoeuvre across the flank of the streamlined flagship. She squinted against the wind as she directed her carpet upwards, toward the grey-uniformed sorcerer standing on top of the hull. He hadn't been hard to find, since the awe-inspiring power with which he calmed the air around the fleet radiated outwards like a beacon.

Trailing glitter, the indigo-haired fairy swerved into his field of vision, slowing down until she was flying at his side.

"What are you doing utside?" the curly-haired blonde asked when he spotted the woman in her swimsuit-like uniform, drenched by the falling rain. The dark general himself remained completely dry, since the raindrops avoided him. "I thought your kind didn't like getting wet."

"We don't, but I wanted to talk to you," the indigo-haired fairy said, "without someone overhearing us." She looked down at the dirigible's envelope, as if she could see through the canvas into the gondola below.

"Oh, great. Is this another attempt to talk me into committing treason? Besides, why are you still hanging out with the fleet? The

Empress set you free, you know."

"We can't just abandon our sister after the evil empress tricked her like that! " Dandel protested, not letting herself be discouraged by his gruff manner. Not that she enjoyed being here. In fact, staying near the dark empress voluntarily when you weren't working for her had to be some sign of insanity. Fortunately, the evil monarch didn't seem to mind their presence, probably since they were lending a hand with caring for the hostages. If left to shoulder the burden on her own, Camilla would probably work until she passed out from exhaustion. Dandel only hoped that they'd have some warning before they reached the limits of Mercury's tolerance.

"I don't see what's so bad about that. My Empress did not want to hire her in the first place, so she will just terminate the contract when she no longer needs her help."

"It's not that simple," Dandel said with a sigh. "Camilla's career is basically over. In our nation, having worked for a Keeper automatically disqualifies you from any further service in the military or any other position of authority. You are no longer considered trustworthy."

"Even if it was an honest mistake?" Jadeite asked, raising an eyebrow.

"It's a mistake of rather huge magnitude," Dandel said sadly. "Someone who can be tricked or coerced like that... It's not fair, but there's a reason why there has never been a successful Keeper incursion in our lands."

Jadeite shrugged. "Whatever. Just don't tell anybody about it. Problem solved."

"The oracles will already know. There are precautions against exactly that kind of thing. Infiltration attempts happen more often than you would think."

"Hmm. You'll have to tell me all about how exactly your realm managed to remain Keeper-free for so long at one point," Jadeite said.

Dandel didn't like his predatory expression and narrowed her eyes at him. In an attempt to guide the conversation back to the original reason why she had been looking for him, she said "Don't be like that! We have proof that you are not as evil as you pretend to be!"

"Not this again. What strange fantasies have you constructed now?" he asked, unimpressed.

"Well, Camilla overheard part of your argument with the dark empress! She told us that you called her plan wrong and would have no part in it!"

The dark general narrowed his eyes, and he raised his right hand. A few angry blue sparks played around the white glove. "It seems someone needs to demonstrate to her that eavesdropping isn't appreciated around here."

"What? No!" Dandel shouted, not liking the sorcerer's sinister expression. "Don't punish her! She only did it because she's worried about what the empress is going to do to all these helpless prisoners. And rightly so, if her plan was so evil that you were willing to risk your life by refusing to go along with it!"

"Ha, as if she would harm me. I'm much too valuable to her," Jadeite answered, but his voice lacked the satisfaction that should satisfy such a statement.

"Which is why you are hiding out here in the rain from her," Dandel countered. The blonde shot her a glare, which she ignored. Her voice became softer and almost pleading. "Look, we want to make sure nothing worse happens to these people, and out here, you are our only potential ally!"

Jadeite stared at the fairy and remained silent, his expression unreadable. Finally, he shook his head and spoke "Girls and their silly ideas. What would you have me do, potentially speaking?"

"Be our man on the inside," Dandel said immediately. Yes! She was getting through to him! "Or at least tell us what she's planning to do with them so we can do something about it!"

"That's no secret. She is taking them back to the Avatar Islands for now, since I wouldn't let her go with her original idea."

The indigo-haired fairy couldn't help shake the impression that the blonde man was amused by something, even if he was hiding it well. "Right. If she had to change her plans, then she might not have an immediate use for them. Given enough time, hmm, yes." The fae looked up, her gaze intense. "With inside help and a week or so of preparation time, we might just be able to steal the prisoners away from her before she can stop us!" Dandel was risking a lot by divulging so much, and so she was rather dismayed when Jadeite snorted and then started laughing out loudly.

"You burn down just one tiny little continent, and suddenly, someone sees it fit to put a bounty on your head." Mukrezar paced up and down as he pondered the news.

"People can be so *unreasonable*," the butler imp said, his form only faintly illuminated by the glow of the flickering phantasms surrounding the former Keeper.

"Two million gold on my head is somewhat excessive. If flattering, in a way."

"There is nothing wrong with excess, Master," the bearded imp reprimanded him.

Mukrezar ignored the creature and kept pacing, only occasionally glancing at the shifting net of multicoloured patterns that moved with him. After a while, his frown disappeared and he shrugged his shoulders in an exaggerated fashion. "Oh well. It's not as if this is the first time everyone wants me dead. There must be some way to exploit this situation!"

"That's the spirit! Are you going to claim the bounty yourself, your Greediness?" the butler suggested, rubbing his hands together.

"As much as that idea pleases me, any fool with a scrying ball could verify that I was still among the living," the pink-haired elf said. He

glanced over at the imp in its fine suit, who was leaning on its pick. "Who allowed you to stop digging? Back to work!"

"Yes, Master," the butler said, sounding disappointed as he picked up his tool and turned toward the rock wall.

Rock splinters went flying as the pick clanged against the wall, and Mukrezar leaned down to pick up one of the pebbles hewn lose by his minion. He turned it between two fingers and smiled at the thin, yellowish pattern he could discern on its surface.

An odd white glow surrounded the index finger he deliberately placed on the metallic gleam. When he pulled the digit away, something viscous and honey-coloured seeped out from the cracks and pores in the raw ore and stuck to its tip.

"Not even enough for a gold coin," Mukrezar muttered as he inspected the thread of metal resting on his palm. He reshaped the substance into a solid loop and raised it before his eyes, his lips twisting into a grin.

"Oh, Master. Are you considering *romance*?" the butler asked and made gagging noises.

"What? Have you lost your mind? Of course not!" Mukrezar whirled around, his eyes flashing. "This," he held up the piece of jewellery between his thumb and index finger, "will, with the proper enchantments, become the foundation of my newest cunning plan!"

The imp's shoulders slumped. "I was afraid you would say that, your Manipulativeness. Are you sure you don't want to go with romance instead?" A sharp rock bounced off his forehead. "Ow! Thank you, Master!"

"Your lack of confidence in my abilities displeases me," the pink-haired elf stated as the dazed imp got back to his feet.

"I would, with the utmost respect, suggest that you re-examine your past success rate with plans that involved magical rings, Master," the imp suggested as he took cover behind a protruding rock.

"Well, there was- hmm, no. Maybe- no, neither. Wait! Starshine

castle crumbled rather beautifully, if my memory doesn't deceive me!" Mukrezar said, his face brightening.

"That does tend to happen when a company of demon spawn scales the walls, Master. Your impatience in that particular siege was glorious to behold!"

"Details, details. The concept-"

"We even recovered the ring later from a magpie's nest in the nearby forest," the butler continued, drawing a glower from his employer.

"You realise that chance alone demands that it has to work one of these days, right?" Mukrezar said through clenched teeth.

"Your Wastefulness, with regard to your current financial situation," the butler pointed at a few sad and lonely coins in the corner, "I would suggest you rein in your ring obsession just this once."

The long-haired elf tossed the ring up and down as he thought. "Maybe you are right." He grinned. "I suppose I *could* go with romance instead."

Last edited: Jul 12, 2016

Paperwork

Originally on 2011-06-09T21:10:00

"We are almost back to the Avatar Islands," Ami informed the seven fairies lined up before her, reminding her of a rainbow with their varied hair colours.

The short-haired girls tensed, distrust evident in the way they shifted their weight to prepare for the worst.

Ami suppressed a sigh. They probably expected her to turn on them, now that she no longer needed their cooperation. "This means that it is time for you to leave. I cannot have you move freely around my dungeon. You would run afoul of the traps. I am, of course, releasing Camilla from my service, too." She mentally reached for the minion link that had formed between her and the shortest of the fairies and severed it.

The blonde fairy sucked in a sharp breath and twitched at the exact same moment, obviously noticing something. "I'm all right," she told Roselle when the orange-haired fairy looked at her with concern.

"What about your hostages, Empress?" Dandel asked, speaking for the group. "How are you protecting them from the traps?"

"They are not hostages," Ami said, "and they will be restricted to a special area of the dungeon that is segregated from the rest, for the most part."

"So, in principle, we could stick around if we stayed in that same area?" Melissa pondered softly, scratching her temple as she glanced at the blind townspeople behind them. Suddenly, her little sister was in her face, cheeks reddened with anger.

"Don't you dare stay here! I didn't lose so much bartering for your freedom only for you to throw it away like that!" the youngest fae shouted, prompting her wide-eyed sister to lean away from the forceful outburst.

"Um," Ami blinked, taken aback by the blonde's anger. "Did I miss something here? As far as I am aware of, I only took the flying carpets from you, and I returned those." As she spoke, a sudden thought went through her mind, and she continued "If I kept you from something important, then I'm willing to compensate you for your time."

"It's not like you can do anything about me no longer being able to hold a proper job in my homeland!" the angry fairy snapped back, only to pale a moment later when she remembered whom exactly she was snarling at. "That is, uh-"

"Why is that?" Ami didn't like the idea that she had unwittingly ruined someone's life. "Are you going to be punished for working for me? But neither of us wanted this!"

"By law, nobody who has worked for a Keeper may hold a position of influence," Dandel explained, indigo eyes downcast.

"I didn't know about that, and I'm very sorry to hear it," Ami said. Damage control, she needed to run some damage control. Wasn't she an Empress? She should be able to do something about this blunder diplomatically!

"Actually," Cerasse interrupted her train of thought by raising a finger and speaking up, "you have not returned everything yet. My staff has been missing since your imps purloined it."

"That thing was dangerous and not yours in the first place," Ami answered absently, still thinking about the blonde fairy's plight. Her icy features brightened, and she smiled at Camilla. "How would you like to be an ambassador?"

"Huh?"

"I could offer your nation an embassy in my realm, under the condition that *you* are made the ambassador," Ami said.

The fairies exchanged uncertain glances.

"I am aware that your nation is probably not particularly eager to open diplomatic relations with me, but they would certainly welcome

the opportunity to have some of their own agents here with my permission, right? And from their point of view, Camilla is already compromised, so there's no need to risk some other high-ranking diplomat."

"I don't know if our superiors would see it that way," Roselle said, brushing her fingers through her orange hair.

"And I'd have to remain here if I was ambassador," the youngest fairy whined, fluttering her wings.

"But you would still be working for your own nation," Ami pointed out. "I know this isn't a great plan, but it's the best I could come up with on short notice. If it doesn't work, I could hire you directly." She put her hands together in front of her chest, waiting with a hopeful expression.

"That got me into trouble in the first place!" Camilla answered, obviously not happy with the proposition.

"Camilla! You should at least consider her offer," Dandel intervened. With an apologetic smile, she addressed Mercury. "Please excuse her brashness, your Majesty, she is only twenty and still immature."

"Ah, right." Ami spared them an awkward moment by not mentioning that she was even younger. "I will prepare the paperwork, then." A brief burst of magic poured into her fabrication spell, turning into writing materials. As she composed her letter, she noticed that the fairies were throwing curious glances at her right hand. *Oh. They have never seen a modern pen before.* She completed her message in silence, but felt stumped when it came to signing it. She hadn't composed any letter in her official capacity yet. Doing this wrong would be terribly impolite and also put the letter's authenticity in question. Fairly embarrassed, she turned her head toward the waiting fairies "Would you, by chance, happen to know the formal way for an Empress to sign her correspondence?"

Standing in front of a podium on a raised dais, Ami let her gaze wander over the large hall packed with comfortable stairs before her.

For a moment, she wished she was elsewhere, for example with the fairies returning home on their flying carpets. Speaking in public was not something she could easily get used to.

A few of the imps scattered all throughout the chamber in case of trouble gave her thumb-up signs. They were ready and waiting. Snyder, standing behind her near the wall, directed an encouraging smile at her before going back to studying the papers he was holding.

Ami's thoughts returned to the seven insect-winged women she had sent away. Hopefully, the small golden box emblazoned with the Mercury symbol she had given them to carry her letter in would convince their superiors that it was real. A valuable gift as proof of good will couldn't hurt, could it?

The expectant muttering in the room grew louder, and Ami realised that she was procrastinating. Her shyness alone was bad enough, but it didn't help that she feared the reactions that her announcement might provoke. In a way, the fact that the two hundred nervous adults occupying the seats were blind and couldn't actually see her helped her overcome her nervousness. She immediately chastised herself when she realised that she was appreciating a benefit of their condition. "May I have your attention please?" she said, her voice getting firmer after a slightly shaky start.

The room quieted down, and faces with bandage-covered eyes swivelled in her direction as their owners tracked her by her voice.

"Thank you. I am sure that all of you are very curious about where you are and what is going to happen to you," she began.

"You are actually going to tell us what's going on now?" a belligerent voice in the third rank asked.

Several of the people seated around the man made disapproving shushing noises, their frowns invisible to him.

"Err, yes. I would have liked to tell you earlier, but I was not sure how you would react, and the vessels were too overloaded to risk a

commotion during the journey," Ami explained.

"You think we'd panic if we knew you were working for a Keeper?" a resigned-sounding women in the front said.

"That-"

"Don't deny it! We aren't stupid. There are imps around, and the way we were suddenly moved from the cramped ships to this place is only something a Keeper could do. There are also no competent priests around to treat us!"

As she spoke, some of the people muttered their assent, while others simply hung their heads. Nobody actually considered this news.

All in all, this was going both better and worse than Ami had expected. "You are not entirely wrong," she was forced to admit. "You are currently on the Avatar Islands."

"The dark empress' domain?" a pot-bellied man, probably a merchant, asked breathlessly. "Light help us all!"

Some of the blind people gasped or screamed at the news, others simply went pale and started shivering. Armrests creaked under the sudden pressure exerted by fingers clenching around them.

Ami's face fell at their reaction. Apparently, having one's worst expectations confirmed was still worse than just having the suspicions. "I assure you that you are not in any danger," she said quickly.

The same man in the third rank as before snorted. "Not in danger? How would you know what the dark empress has planned for us?"

"My name is Sailor Mercury, current Empress of the Avatar Islands," Ami replied calmly. This, unfortunately, did not seem to reassure anyone. She was sure that her listeners would be stampeding toward the exits right now if they weren't blind. She raised her voice to make herself heard over the hopeless laments and desperate pleas for mercy echoing through the room. "I am nowhere near as bad as my reputation!"

An elderly man raised his hand and asked in a hoarse voice "W-what are you going to do to us?" After a moment of hesitation, he added "Your Majesty."

Ami had expected that question and prepared an answer in advance. It wasn't the entire truth, but close enough, and it would fit their expectations. Somewhat. "Crowned Death wants you dead. Since he and his cult are my enemies and I can't strike at him directly, I am going to antagonise him by keeping you all alive and well instead."

To her relief, the postures of the blind people in their seats relaxed somewhat. Obviously, a Keeper helping them out of spite was more believable than one doing it out of the good of her heart.

"In the short term, I will also be attempting to cure your eyes, proving to the world that I'm stronger than his curse! In the longer term, I shall see if I can't ransom you back to your homelands. As for the immediate future, my assistant Snyder here- " she waited until the acolyte had stepped to her side with heavy steps that were certain to be heard by the audience, "- will tell you everything you need to know about living here. If you need anything, tell him, and he will pass the request along to me."

Ami made room for the acolyte in red and white and withdrew to the back of the stage. He spoke with an ease and confidence that made her slightly envious. With a sinking feeling, she realised that her title as an Empress would inevitably lead to many more public appearances.

"Mercury? A word please?" Jered's voice startled her before she could return to her work.

"Yes?" she asked, turning toward the wavy-haired man.

"I may have figured out a way to get the dwarf kingdoms to negotiate with us, but I will require both funds and your permission to go ahead."

Ami blinked, having shelved the topic of adamantine during the hectic past four days. "What is your plan?"

"Your title is the key. We will commission a crown for you," the weasel-featured man said with a grin. "Dwarfs are famed for their craftsmanship and take great pride therein. While they might not like us, I doubt they would be willing to pass up the unique opportunity to create the official crown of an empire. Not if they could gain that much prestige for this fairly harmless task. We could then use the negotiations to further our agenda."

"It seems reasonable," Ami said after a moment of deliberation. She couldn't see any drawbacks, aside perhaps from having to replace her tiara with something more garish. "Gem production remains stable, so we can afford it. Go ahead. I will leave the details up to you."

Mukrezar sat at his desk, the tip of his tongue poking out from between his lips as he drew an ink-tipped quill over a sheet of paper with slow, deliberate movements. He ignored the scraping of stone against stone behind him that slowly got closer. After a while, a shadow fell over him, and the laboured breath of his butler coming from somewhere behind his right shoulder replaced the previous noises.

"That," the voice of the well-dressed imp sounded disdainful, "is not romantic at all."

Mukrezar turned around and came face to bug-eyed face with his diminutive butler. He frowned and let his eyed wander down the imp's short body to find him standing on a boulder that was almost as big as the creature. The pink-haired elf's eyebrows rose as he saw the scratch marks on the ground leading to the back of the cavern. "You brought this," he gestured at the rock underneath the imp's feet, "all the way over here just so you could look over my shoulder and criticise what I am doing?"

"Of course, Master. It is the solemn duty of nosy servants everywhere to spy on their masters, particularly when there is the chance of learning something juicy to gossip about. Not that this is going to help with that," he pointed at Mukrezar's work with one digit of his three-fingered hand, sounding reproachful.

"Right, because you know so much more about romance than me," the pink-haired elf answered, glaring at his minion. "Wooed any comely imp ladies while I was away? Or ever been in the general vicinity of a female? No? Didn't think so." The former Keeper brushed his mane out of his face and grinned smugly.

"Nevertheless, Master, this cannot be romantic. I can tell because looking at it does not make me sick!"

"As usual, you have no appreciation for my genius. I'm certainly not letting all this work go to waste." Mukrezar took the paper and put it on top of a neat stack of others. He waved his hand over it, and smoke rose from the pile. With a second wave, the papers rose into the air and fanned out until they covered the desk like tiles. Each of the sheets showed an identical copy of the map he had drawn. He selected the closest one, rolled it up, and sealed it with some wax from the dribbling candle standing nearby. To finish, he pressed his signet against the warm mass, leaving an imprint of a stylised reaper's face in the seal. "Here," he tossed the finished letter over his shoulder, deliberately aiming so poorly that the servant had to launch himself off his perch to catch it. "That one is done, go deliver it! The others will need more individual adjustments."

Jadeite kept to the back of the wide, spacious, and well-lit room that Mercury had provided as a meeting area to the blind patients. Thin railings around the walls provided guidance to those adventurous enough to leave their beds, and generous padding on edges and hard surfaces reduced the risk of injuries. Nevertheless, only a few of the abductees were sitting on the upholstery and chatting with each other, and none very animatedly.

He thought that Mercury's presence was partly to blame for this. She currently had a rat with a collar and a backpack standing upright on her palm, squeaking from time to time. The heavy-built man tentatively holding the animal's leash between his meaty fingers had a rather nervous and sceptical look on his face as he listened to the girl's explanations.

Jadeite felt that he had done the right thing when he refused to let

Mercury ferry the rescued captives to the surfacers, even if she disagreed. Nevertheless, she obviously resented what he had done and was keeping him at arms length, only talking to him when she had to. *Be reasonable. She's simply too busy for irrelevant prattle,* Jadeite told himself, but it was little comfort.

Things had gone well, all things considered. His act of defiance would have been suicidal if he had still been working for Beryl, he reminded himself with a grimace. Mercury hadn't even openly punished him. Or had she? For some reason, keeping talks with him short and businesslike felt like a punishment. How had she made him miss her smiles, anyway? As subtle tortures went, that one was surprisingly novel and effective.

Jadeite sighed. It wasn't just their fight that was depressing the young empress. With every look at the prisoners, she seemed unhappier and less lively. The dark general paced up and down the room, his scowl deep enough that Tiger and Mareki discretely sneaked out of the room when they spotted it.

The blonde's eyes followed the teenager as she strode from patient to patient, stopping here and there to take readings with her Mercury computer and to ask questions. How long had she been in that golem body now? That couldn't be healthy. She would probably pass out the moment she returned to human form.

"Umbra, get over here."

"Yes, Sir?" the black-cloaked youma floated over to his side, her mobility not affected much by her missing and bandaged leg.

Jadeite was still staring at Mercury's back. "We need to convince our Empress to take a break."

"Are you sure that is wise? She has been in a foul mood lately," the youma cautioned, probably worried for her own safety. In the thin slit behind her mask and her hood, her eyes darted left and right, as if she was searching for an escape route.

"Just come along and nod at the right times. She's not going to hurt you since you are injured, and she is already angry at me, so things

can't get much worse." Jadeite was already striding toward the centre of the room, giving the few blind people fumbling around a wide berth.

"Jadeite. What do you want now?" the ice girl asked as he approached, not bothering to turn around or even look up from her work.

"Empress, you need to take a break. Your exhaustion has led to some questionable decisions already, and it is only going to get worse as time passes."

"This is more important," Mercury said in a flat tone of voice. "If I can just figure out-"

"You are obsessing too much over this!" Jadeite interrupted, prompting Mercury's rodent to hiss at him angrily. "Trying to help these people is nice, but they will still be here after you got some sleep. You have other responsibilities too! You haven't even arranged a proper debriefing yet! "

"You don't understand. This is my fault! If I hadn't lost the Mantle, none of this would have happened!" the ice golem raised her voice, whirling around to face him with red-glowing eyes. "I need to fix this!"

Jadeite almost faltered when he saw the haunted expression on her face. "Only Crowned Death and his goons are at fault here. And while your current body can keep going indefinitely, your mind cannot. Please, just let go of your inappropriate guilt here and consider the greater picture. You can't help them if you are barely functional. Besides, you need to manage your dungeon."

"Have Tiger handle what doesn't require my special powers," the obstinate empress replied, already typing away on her computer again. "She should know my mind well enough to make the right decisions."

"That is completely irresponsible, and-" Jadeite stopped mid-sentence when he suddenly found himself in the corridor in front of his room, with Umbra at his side.

Surprised by the unannounced transport, the youma flinched. "It does not seem as if she is willing to listen, Sir," she commented. "Should we just let her get it out of her system? That would certainly be the easiest solution, since we are not currently under attack."

Jadeite felt irritated at being sent to his room like a little child. His brow furrowed. "No," he declared, "I'm going to get some reinforcements and try again!"

Last edited: Dec 4, 2016

Exhaustion

Originally on 2011-06-17T01:42:00

Ami felt the corners of her lips curve downwards as she noticed the walls flash a faint violet. That familiar glow could only be Jadeite teleporting in somewhere behind her. She had thought she had made her position absolutely clear when she had transported him away. With a start, she noticed the patient before her cringe. She realised that her fingers were pressing much harder down on his wrist than necessary in order to take his pulse. "Oh, sorry about that," she apologised, angry at herself for losing her composure so easily just because of the dark general's presence. With a sigh, she turned to face the blonde. "What is it now? This had better be important."

"Oh, it is," Jadeite said. The grey-uniformed man stood with his arms crossed, a confident smile on his face. "See?" He turned halfway toward the back of the room, pointing at Umbra with an open-handed gesture.

The one-legged youma held a sphere-like object covered with a black cloth before her and looked nervous. She briefly met Ami's eyes and quickly looked down.

"Hey! What did you do that for?" Sailor Moon's voice could be heard from underneath the covered crystal ball.

Surprised at hearing her friends voice, Ami immediately started worrying why her friends would contact her outside of the usual hours. Was the Dark Kingdom on the move?

However, Jadeite pre-empted her questions. "I called them. The cover is in place so you won't have to explain to your mother why you are looking like this right now."

Ami's eyes went huge. "My mother? Now?" For the moment, her patients were forgotten. *I'm going to see my mother again!* Happiness mixed with worry. *What am I going to tell her? How do I*

explain everything? Maybe she can tell me how to help these people!"

Jadeite waved a gloved hand in front of her face to catch her attention. "You might want to get back to your normal form first," he suggested, sounding amused.

"Oh, of course." It wouldn't do to be seen as an ice golem. *Mom might think that I'm some kind of shape-shifting imposter! I hope my long disappearance didn't hurt her too much!* With a burst of magic, she propelled herself out of the ice statue she was possessing. The red-eyed black cloud of energy she turned into solidified into a tar-like column as it condensed and sprouted limbs. Moments later, the darkness faded away, and Ami stood on her own feet again. Her knees felt weak and jelly-like as the exhaustion hit her, but shook her head to fight it off. *I hope they didn't shift the viewpoint of their crystal ball yet. Mom wouldn't recognise me as Sailor Mercury!*

With a mental command, the black and blue sailor uniform she was wearing dissolved into glowing ribbons and was replaced by her regular school uniform. She had probably given Jadeite an eyeful right now, but she couldn't bring herself to care. Mainly because her legs were refusing to support her weight now that she was back in civilian form. Just before her eyes fell shut and her vision went black, she felt two strong arms catch her.

"That went about as well as I expected," Jadeite muttered, not at all surprised as he shifted the weight of the unconscious girl in his arms so that her head was resting against his right shoulder.

Umbra, whom the comment had been directed at, fidgeted and looked at the inert form of the empress. He guessed that she was thinking something along the lines of *"Why in Metallia's name did I have to become involved in this?"*

"What did you do to her?" came an angry screech from the crystal ball. Sailor Moon had obviously decided to circumvent the obstacle obstructing her view by simply scrying on the room.

"You tricked her!" a second voice accused, "why did you tell her we had her mother here? We were only supposed to talk some sense into her!"

"It was the easiest way to get her out of that golem," Jadeite said unapologetically. "And I didn't have to do anything. She passed out all on her own." He approached Umbra and pulled the black rag off the crystal ball so he could see whom he was talking to.

Luna sighed as she took in Ami's sleeping face. "I suppose it couldn't be helped, with her having stayed awake for four days." She narrowed her eyes at the scrying ball right in front of her furry paws. "You haven't explained why she would deprive herself of sleep for so long yet! She is too smart to risk her health like that for nothing."

Jadeite shrugged and looked briefly down at the sleeping girl he was holding. "Unforeseen complications during the rescue mission. We got the people out, but... well, see for yourself." He stepped aside, letting the cat and the blonde see the back of the room unhindered.

Sailor Moon gasped, and the blood fled from her face. "Are- are those people blind?" she asked in a small voice.

The dark general nodded. "Yes. All of them. Mercury thinks that it's her fault that those crazy cultists went after them in the first place, and she is trying to find a way to undo the damage. She hasn't allowed herself a break since she rescued them."

"Poor Ami," Sailor Moon said, her lips quivering. Her gaze lingered on the two blind children in the back of the room who were sharing a bowl of cookies. "What kind of monster would do something like that?"

"Is there anything we can do to help?" Luna asked.

"Well, if you could manage to really have Mrs. Mizuno present before Mercury wakes up, you would spare me a whole lot of trouble," Jadeite said, having the good grace to look a bit sheepish. "Aside from that, I don't think there's much you can do from where you are."

"Right! Ami will need any comfort she can get!" Sailor Moon answered, straightening and thrusting a fist into the air. "I'll make sure she gets to see her, even if I have to break into her apartment!"

"Sailor Moon!" Luna chided, shaking her head. She focused on Jadeite again. "Thanks for taking care of Ami," she said, "but I still don't like you lying to her. If you hurt her..." The cat unsheathed her claws.

"Shouldn't you be making sure that your Moon brat doesn't do something stupid?" he countered. With a smirk, he watched the talking cat bound after her charge, muttering something unflattering under her breath.

"That was quite the gamble, Sir" Umbra pointed out when the crystal ball went inert. "What would you have done if the empress had remained conscious?"

"Then I would have helped her tiredness along a bit," the grey-uniformed man said. "I was never worried about that part of my plan"

"She is not going to be happy when she wakes up."

"Yes, I'm still figuring out what to do about that," Jadeite confessed, "but since she's going to be out for several hours at least, I'm sure I'll be able to think of something. First things first, though. Let's get her to her room."

Cathy let out a yelp of pain when her orcish opponent tagged her sword hand hard with an upward swing. The iron maul's impact rattled her bones and sent her sword flying in a high arc. It sailed over the heads of the spectators cheering around the combat pit, and landed with a loud clang behind them.

The swordswoman leapt back, kicking up sand as she did, and landed in a neutral stance. *Damn, but I have come to rely too much on the boosts that Mercury's magic gave me!* She shook her injured hand in order to make the numbness recede. "All right, that's enough. You win this one," she said to the approaching brute. An

instant later, she had to throw herself aside to avoid the whistling downward swing that drove the maul's head deep into the soft ground. Wide-eyed, she shouted "Hey! Spar is over! What do you think you are doing?"

"Getting myself promoted," the unkempt orc growled, a dangerous glint in his pig-like eyes. With a grunt, he brought his heavy weapon up for another swing. "You aren't that tough without the Keeper's magic backing you up. She deserves a commander who is strong for *real*!"

Just great, this newcomer fool thought Mercury would handle things similar to the way other Keepers did. Cathy back-pedalled furiously, just managing to stay ahead of his strikes. "Stop it! The Empress isn't going to reward insubordination!" she protested while her eyes darted left and right, looking for something to use as a weapon. No help was forthcoming from the watching troops. If she survived this, she'd have to hammer the concepts of teamwork and protecting their superior officers into them. Painfully.

She gasped when the latest swing of her attacker turned out to be a feint. Already committed to her dodge, she managed to twist her body sideways such that his follow-up only clipped her and tossed her away a few steps, rather than crushing her ribcage through her breastplate. She needed a weapon, quickly, and there seemed to be only one option. Gritting her teeth, she focused on the one spell she had learned. Even as fire stripped away her armour and trousers, she could feel a weight materialising in her hands.

Before the Reaper scythe had time to fully form, she lunged forward, hoping to thrust it into her enemy's chest while he was still squinting into the flames hugging her form.

The orc was good, perhaps even better than her, though. Despite his surprise, he managed to bat the blow aside as bulging muscles tore at the weight of his hammer-like weapon, bringing it up in a parry.

While he was still spinning from the inertia, Cathy darted in close, leading with her right shoulder. She was much lighter than the monster, and a tackle wouldn't normally have had much effect on a

creature like him. However, the pauldron covering her shoulder not only represented a large percentage of the reaper's skimpy armour, it was also decorated with a sharp spike. The blonde could feel weak resistance as it bit deeply into her opponent's pink skin, spraying her side with the hot blood of her enemy.

With a gurgle, the orc went to his knees, grasping at the spurting wound in his throat.

Pumped on adrenaline, Cathy leapt back and watched him drop into the stained sand face-first. "Get a healer in here!" she ordered, but she didn't expect him to survive. That didn't bother her much, since the jerk had been trying to kill her, after all. She'd have to report this incident to Mercury, though, who might be disappointed in her. Panting, she brushed the sweat from her brow. At least, this hadn't been a misunderstanding. Several times since passing out during the Dreadfog Island battle, she had almost gotten into fights with monsters who didn't recognise her civilian form. Fortunately, merely informing them about her identity had been enough to break the disguise effect in those situations.

As she climbed up the ladder out of the pit, she could feel all eyes on her sweat-glistening body. She was just glad that Mercury had come up with a version of the reaper armour spell that included a bra. "Not one word," she hissed as she strode through the goblins and orcs parting before her. "Get back to your regular exercises!" she shouted as she marched out of the training hall.

Grumbling, she stomped through the corridors leading to her room. As she approached the library, she found herself wishing that the lighting in this place left some shadows to sneak through. Being seen in this outfit was embarrassing, and in her civilian identity doubly so.

"...think she wants with those wretches?" a male voice escaped from the half-open library door.

"Well, she is an Empress. Maybe she wants a population for her empire?" someone else speculated.

"My guess is sacrifices," a third, older voice said.

"That's silly. She wouldn't need them well cared for in that case!"

"Ah, but you weren't with us when we were still in Malleus' old dungeon, Nemez," the old voice contradicted. "When we were afflicted by a plague, she placated the dark gods by sacrificing power drained from everyone. Clearly, she wants a large, regenerative source of sacrifices!"

Cathy could hear some approving noises as the other dark magicians considered the merits of the idea. Maybe she could sneak past unseen while they were distracted by their discussion?

"... think her goddess helped her defeat Crowned Death's monster?"

"I heard rumours that she *ate* it."

"Don't believe that nonsense. She was with us during the battle, remember?"

"I was sitting closest to her, and I could hear a girl's voice that I didn't recognise from her crystal ball," Nemez commented. "Think it was one of those allies even more powerful than her that she told Torian about?"

"Where's Torian, anyway?"

Cathy suppressed a groan. Why did they have to start looking around for their comrade the exact moment she attempted to make her way unseen past the open door? The wolf whistles were particularly vexing. Dressed silly or not, she wouldn't let them get away with that. The blonde suppressed her urge to cover herself and stalked closer to them. Her scowl challenged the dozen or so pairs of eyes staring at her. "Stop leering at me, and make yourself useful! Give me a robe or something!"

"Who are you that you think you can command us?" one of the younger warlocks said, his gaze glued to the swordswoman's chest.

"I know very well that you recognise me, since you were all in the command room when I passed out, and I'll be sure to remember you when I report to the Empress ," Cathy replied with a nasty grin.

"It was only a joke!" the warlock protested, shrinking into the crowd.

"Ah, Commander," a warlock with a shaggy black beard said, "did you run into trouble?" He pointed a crooked finger at the blood coating her side.

"Some. The fool has been dealt with."

"I see." The purple-robed man nodded. "In any case, it is good that you are here, since I have a question. Do you think the Empress would mind if we investigated one of her airships for a while?"

The under-dressed blonde blinked. "The airships?" Cathy didn't think the magic users understood enough about them to find out anything useful. However, the warlocks apparently had no intention of getting her some clothes, so who was she to keep them from wandering around the vile-smelling decks for no gain? "Go ahead, she's not happy with the remodelling she had to do to accommodate all the passengers, anyway, so you probably won't be able to mess things up."

The man brightened, and he turned to his colleagues. "You heard her! Let's find out what arcane secrets we can learn!"

Like children clustering around a fascinating new toy, the warlocks huddled together. "I'll get the candles!"

"Which books do you think would be the most useful to take along?"

"Forget about the books, we need more measuring instruments! The dowsing rods should-"

There was a ripping noise as a scythe blade stabbed down through the hood of a warlock turning his back to Cathy. Using the weapon like a hook, she yanked him backwards, and he dropped on his behind. As he looked up at her bared teeth in stunned surprise, she demanded "Clothes. Now!"

"Y-yes, Commander!"

A few waves of his hands and a muttered incantation later, she felt soft fabric settle over her armour. The maroon robe he had created

wasn't exactly the height of fashion, but it covered her to her satisfaction. She removed the blade from the vicinity of his neck, prompting him to let out a relieved breath. "Good. I'll leave you to your discussions now," she said into the silence, turned on her heel, and strutted out. Slamming the door behind her was perhaps overly theatrical, but it felt good. The room remained quiet for several heartbeats before she heard a reverent voice through the oaken obstacle.

"I envy her closeness to the Empress! Imagine how much knowledge and power she must be able to glean!"

Now wasn't that soothing to her ego? Cathy continued on her way with a smile.

"I prefer imagining that blood had been sweet syrup instead," a younger voice quipped.

Cathy almost missed a step and let out an angry huff.

"Oh, yeah. Quite a nice sight," a sagely third voice agreed, "but Venna has bigger..."

Cathy stormed off, not wanting to hear what else those old lechers had to say, her mood thoroughly ruined once more.

Jadeite shimmered into sight in front of Mercury's bedroom door. He pondered what to do next with the girl who looked quite comfortable in his arms. Wasn't there any imp around he could delegate getting her into her pyjamas and bed to? He turned around when rapid, clanking footsteps approached, and his face lit up when he spotted Cathy, who was wearing a hideous maroon dress for some reason. "Cathy!"

Startled surprise replaced the fierce scowl on the swordswoman's face when Jadeite appeared before her so suddenly that she almost crashed into him. Her eyes widened when she noticed whom he was carrying.

"Here!" the grey-uniformed man handed the schoolgirl to the long-

haired blonde, forcing her to let go of her scythe in order to not drop the younger girl."Tuck her in, will you?" He pointed a thumb at Mercury's bedroom door.

"Huh?"

Jadeite teleported away before Cathy could ask him any questions. He had come up with the basic outline of a plan to placate Mercury when she woke up, and was eager to put it into action. First, he needed to pick something up from a dimly lit room. He approached the large cot at one end of the chamber, leaned down, and seized the elongated object lying at its side.

It didn't move.

"Let. Go!" Jadeite demanded as he glared down at the owner of the weapon. "You'll get it back later." The horned bundle of bandages staring back up at him with solid white eyes let out a growl.

Getting the injured reaper to let go of his scythe took a foot placed on his chest and some very determined application of force, but in the end, the sweat-drenched dark general was victorious in the tug-of-war. Heedless of the angry roars behind him, he shouldered the weapon and moved onwards. The clucking of chickens in the hatchery guided him toward his next destination.

A Mother-Daughter Talk

Originally on 2011-06-23T22:53:00

Dr. Mizuno stared into the glowing crystal ball before her with wide-eyed wonder. Until Sailor Moon had activated it with a touch, she had considered such devices superstitious nonsense. At any other time, the blue-haired woman would have thought it surreal to have a real magical girl sitting across from her at her kitchen table. Now, however, she could barely tear her gaze away from the image she saw within the glowing orb. Her little angel was alive! She almost wept tears of joy when she first saw her daughter sleeping peacefully in a bed, her blue bangs splayed out over her pillow like a halo.

However, behind the indescribable relief of seeing that Ami was well, a terrible worry gnawed at her mind. Could this all be a lie, an illusion created by the crystal ball? Her voice was shaking with emotion as she looked up at Sailor Moon. "Real magic. I can scarcely believe it," she breathed. "Is that really her?"

The large-eyed blonde nodded enthusiastically, making her distinctive red hair ornaments bob up and down. "Yes, I talked to her myself. That's Ami, without a doubt!"

"You can talk to her?" Dr. Mizuno was suddenly off her seat and leaned forward, gripping Sailor Moon's hands. "Can I too? What do I need to do?"

"Um, you'll need to wait until she wakes up," Sailor Moon replied, startled by the woman's eagerness. "She needs to get her own crystal ball first."

Disappointed, Dr. Mizuno sat down again, filing away the information that her daughter not only had a magical artefact, but also knew how to use it. "I'll wait as long as it takes!" she declared and returned her attention to the scrying device. She felt slightly embarrassed when she noticed that the other girl was massaging her wrists where she had gripped them.

"It shouldn't take too long now," the blonde promised. "She went to bed over half a day ago."

"She looks so pale," Dr. Mizuno murmured, taking in the dark rings under her daughter's eyes. "Are you sure she is all right?"

"She's not going out into the sun much," Sailor Moon explained, "and she was a bit tired last time I checked on her, but otherwise, she should be fine."

"Do you know where she is? Can you retrieve her?" Ami's mother asked, hope seeping into her tone voice.

Sailor Moon shook her head and answered with downcast eyes "If I could, then I would already have, Mrs. Mizuno."

A myriad of other questions went through Dr. Mizuno's mind, but they took a back seat to just looking into the crystal ball. If she couldn't talk to her daughter right now, then maybe she could find out more about her situation instead? Was she safe? Ami's bed looked clean and sturdy, if somewhat simplistic in design.

"Um, what are you doing?" Sailor Moon asked when the worried mother started leaning across the table at weird angles to catch glimpses of other parts of the room. "I can change the point of view, if you like."

"Yes, please," Dr. Mizuno said, her face brightening. When the view zoomed out, the sight of four motionless figures lurking around the bed made her stifle a scream. Fortunately, she quickly realised that the shapes were just mannequins. Crafted from some clear substance, they resembled her daughter and stood around her bed like guardians. Why did her little girl have things like that in her room? It couldn't be to show off her clothes, because the robes the things were wearing were little better than rags. Puzzled, the older Mizuno continued her survey of the place.

The furniture in the chamber was arranged just as it was in Ami's bedroom here in the apartment. This could only mean that her daughter was homesick, the doctor noted with relief. Ami hadn't run away for some reason, then! The painting over her bed that replaced

a real window looked rather morbid though, with its dead trees and grey, crumbling buildings. Perhaps it was the best Ami had been able to get? The fact that she had been able to customise a room for herself meant that she wasn't destitute, at least. Even if the place was probably fairly cheap, given the state of its electrical lighting. Then again, those swirl-like frost patterns decorating the walls showed some exquisite craftsmanship. And there were those odd glass statues. She needed to know more. "Can you get a closer view of Ami's desk, please?"

Sailor Moon nodded and waved her hand over the crystal ball. Instantly, it changed to show the neatly-stacked books and papers lined up on the cluttered wooden surface.

Try as she might, Dr. Mizuno couldn't decipher the titles of the tomes. Judging from the symbols, diagrams, and skulls decorating their covers, they seemed to be treating arcane and esoteric matters. Rather unpleasant ones, at that. What had her daughter gotten herself into, and what was so important that she would be willing to learn an entire foreign language for it? Before this afternoon and seeing proof of magic's existence with her own eyes, she would have scoffed at the notion of books on the supernatural containing anything useful.

"Curses Which Blight the Flesh and Sear the Mind?" Sailor Moon muttered under her breath, staring into the crystal ball.

Dr. Mizuno followed the blonde's gaze and looked at her abruptly. "You can actually read the titles?" Dr. Mizuno asked, meeting the blonde's eyes. The other girl didn't strike her as the particularly studious type.

"You mean you can't?" Sailor Moon asked, blinking.

"They are not written in Japanese," Ami's mother said, astonished that the younger girl wouldn't notice something like that.

"Really?" Sailor Moon took another look, and Dr. Mizuno saw the magical girl's eyes widen in honest surprise. "You are right! Uh," she scratched her head. "What language is that?"

"You don't know?"

The blonde shrugged. "Must be magic!" she said and seemed content enough to leave it at that. "Hey, wait a minute..."

"Magic." The blue-haired woman repeated, nonplussed. She decided to drop the matter. If magic could let her see her missing daughter, then why shouldn't it be able to translate languages? And why was Sailor Moon frowning and muttering about a cat? In any case, if that translation of the book title was correct, then Ami's choice of literature was objectionable, to say the least. She looked back at her sleeping daughter, smiling fondly. No matter, the important part was that she was safe. "Sailor Moon, could you move the view over to the wardrobe, please?"

Reminded about the older woman's presence, the sailor senshi blushed slightly and stopped grumbling about a certain forgetful feline. With a wave of her hand, the crystal ball now showed Ami's closet, which remained slightly ajar for some reason. It took the blonde a few tries to manoeuvre the viewpoint close enough to the gap to see some of the clothes inside.

Dr. Mizuno immediately noticed Ami's school uniform, which wasn't as neatly-folded as she was used to from her daughter. Her gaze wandered downwards, towards some kind of gold-embroidered black uniform in Ami's size. From what she could determine, it looked like an expensive high-quality product. *Has Ami joined the military?* she wondered as her heart started hammering in sudden worry. More hurried now, she continued her inspection. There was a plain one-piece swimsuit, which was fairly typical for Ami. The items on the lowest shelf, however, were not, and much less wholesome to boot. Leather underwear and a metal bikini top were not something that a mother wanted to find in her teenage daughter's wardrobe. What had poor Ami been forced to do to survive? "Show me the outside of her room," Dr. Mizuno demanded, her brow furrowed. If someone was hurting poor Ami...

Sailor Moon looked surprised, but complied. Wiggling her fingers, she directed the crystal ball's viewpoint toward the bedroom door and straight through it.

Dr. Mizuno got her next nasty shock when she caught sight of the corridor outside. There were guards, and they were undoubtedly alive. To make matters worse, they weren't human. Green and spindly, they had large, triangular ears and were holding wicked-looking scythes.

"There are monsters guarding her door! She has been captured by youma! How can you say she is all right?" Dr. Mizuno shouted, her eyes burning as she looked at Sailor Moon.

"Ack, no, you got it wrong!" the blonde squawked in protest, raising her hands to bring them between herself and the concerned mother. In her haste, she bowled over the crystal ball, which started rolling across the table. With a hasty grab, she managed to catch it before it could drop off the edge. Letting out a relieved breath, she placed it back in a central position and reactivated it, showing Ami. "Please don't worry! Ami is their boss, not their prisoner," she explained. "Err, and those things are not youma either!"

Ami's mother shot the blonde an incredulous look.

Sailor Moon started fidgeting under her stare and started scratching the back of her head. "Well, it's true. See, she- wait, she's waking up!"

The blue-haired girl was indeed stirring. Distracted from her current line of inquiry, Dr. Mizuno watched her daughter roll onto her back and then sit up slowly. With the back of her hands, she rubbed her eyes, and then stretched.

Sailor Moon winced when Dr. Mizuno let out an ear-piercing scream. "What happened to her eyes?"

Ami woke and slowly sat up, overcoming her reluctance to leave the warm, comfortable covers. She still felt a bit tired and also confused, since she couldn't remember actually going to bed. What had happened? Following her typical morning ritual, she automatically checked the wristband around her left arm. Its scrying alert was glowing faintly, interrupting her current train of thoughts. Sucking in

a surprised breath, she turned to the side, dangling her legs over the side of her bed and putting her feet on the ground in case she had to move quickly. Her crystal ball appeared on her lap, and she focused on following the scrying to its source. Her heart skipped a beat when the device showed her a very familiar face with an aghast expression. "Mom? Mom!"

"Ami! I'm so glad you are alive! I'm missing you so much!"

A brilliant smile appeared on Ami's face, joining the tears of joy in the corners of her eyes. Overwhelmed by emotion, she gulped to clear her throat and answered "I miss you too! I wish I could be there with you!"

"Darling, what happened to you?" her mother asked, her voice turning strained. "Your eyes..."

"Oh, this?" Ami blinked, having momentarily forgotten about her unusual appearance. "Don't worry, it's not harmful! It does not hurt or influence my vision in any way!" she hurried to reassure her mother. However, the question managed to bring things back to her mind that she had forgotten in her exhilaration. There were facts she simply didn't want her mother to know in order to prevent her from worrying her too much. First and foremost was her missing soul, and how many close brushes with death she had already had. *Mom would never be happy again if I died without my soul and she knew what would have happened to me!* Second was her identity as Sailor Mercury. While her mother would most likely be upset about her extracurricular activities, the real problem was that she would also be able to deduce the identity of Sailor Moon and Sailor Mars. It wasn't as if Ami had any other friends her age, sadly enough.

"Is something wrong?" Mrs Mizuno asked. "You looked troubled. Are you safe? There are monsters outside the door!"

Ami checked with her Keeper sight, and waved her hand dismissively. "Ah, they are just goblins. Don't worry, they are working for me. They couldn't harm me, even if they wanted."

"Working for you? Ami, what happened? Where are you?"

"It's a long story, Mom," Ami began, her mind racing as she pondered how to censor the parts she wanted to keep secret. She felt a bit bad about lying by omission, but she didn't have a better solution right now. "I got caught up in a battle between the sailor senshi and a youma-"

Sailor Moon wilted under the glare Dr. Mizuno directed at her.

"Mother, it wasn't her fault! It was an accident nobody could have predicted!" Ami defended the blonde. "In any case, I got transported to a world where magic is common. I have seen maps, and I'm no longer on Earth."

"No longer on Earth?" Dr. Mizuno repeated. "But how are you going to get back, then?" Her head whipped towards Sailor Moon. "You! What are you going to do about this?"

Sailor Moon eeped and slid off her chair until only her eyes were still above the table's surface, looking up fearfully at the wrathful face of Ami's mother. "Scary!"

"Mom! We are working on it! I'm learning magic in order to find a way home!" Ami said, drawing her mother's complete attention.

"Magic? Is that why your eyes are glowing like that? And why those monsters are working for you?"

"Yes, that is part of the reason," Ami said. "When I first got here, I managed to claim an abandoned artefact that provided me with magical power and gave me the ability to build underground fortresses," she began, carefully omitting that she had been able to use magic before. "It's responsible for my current look and also makes the monsters consider me their natural leader."

"Are you sure you can keep them under control?" Dr. Mizuno asked, her voice doubtful.

"Mom, they are terrified of me," Ami confessed. "The typical owners of such artefacts are not pleasant people. The creatures think that I am some kind of evil overlord. They wouldn't dare attack me. And even if they did, I could just do this!" Ami transported herself out of

her bed and reappeared standing in front of it. "I have become rather hard to catch."

Dr. Mizuno gaped like a fish. "You- what- that's- " she began as she tried coming to grips with what she had seen. "That should be impossible." She started massaging her temples. "Sorry about that, Ami. When you said you were starting to learn magic, I didn't fully understand what that really means." She looked thoughtful for a moment, which emphasised their family resemblance. "So. The monsters are working for you. Have you been stuck with nothing but monsters these last few months?"

"No, I have some humans working for me and helping with the research too," Ami answered. "I have to avoid most contact with the surface world, though."

Dr. Mizuno understood immediately. "Because of the monsters? Do they think you are some kind of dark lord?"

Sailor Moon chimed in "Empress, actually."

Ami narrowed her eyes at her. She had been trying to avoid mentioning that, since she was known as Empress *Mercury*.

"Empress?" Ami's mother gasped. "Are you letting the power get to your head, Ami?"

"That's not it!" the teenager protested. "It all started when..." She proceeded to give her mother a heavily-edited summary of what she had been up to since she had arrived in this world She left out the parts where she had to duel a reaper and where several dark gods were after her head, and severely downplayed the danger she had been in. Naturally, she also omitted the more embarrassing incidents, her current reputation, and her crush on Jadeite. "...and so I'm currently the Empress of an empty wasteland surrounded by oceans, with no enemies around. I should be safe here."

Her mother's eyes were watering. "My poor darling. You shouldn't have had to go through to all that at your age! Or at any age! Please be careful and keep away from the fighting from now on!" She shook her head tiredly. "It's enough to give any mother nightmares," she

muttered.

"Sorry, mother," Ami apologised.

"Can I have a look at those people you saved?" Dr. Mizuno said suddenly. "You may have some healing magic, but I'm a proper doctor. Maybe I can help."

"Of course," the blue-haired girl agreed. She was already starting to feel guilty for spending so much time for her personal benefit, instead of trying to help the poor victims. "Just track me to my new location!"

"The capabilities of this crystal ball are fascinating," Dr. Mizuno's voice came from the glowing sphere in Ami's hands.

The blue-haired girl was still in her pyjamas and standing next to a moustached man sitting on a chair. Since he couldn't see, she was unconcerned about her state of dress. "Please don't move your head," she instructed in a friendly tone of voice. "An expert is zooming in on your wound through a crystal ball to see what can be done to help."

"As you wish," the man muttered, stiffening.

"Look at the magnification on this thing," Ami's mother stated with professional interest, "and with no risk to the patient or casting shadows, either! Get me closer, please, it looks as if that scab is coming loose."

"Y-yes." Sailor Moon's face was taking on a greenish tint as the image in the crystal ball turned more and more the colour of raw meat.

"No pus or other contaminants," the doctor noted professionally. "Ami, do you have antibiotics to prevent infections?"

"I have a spell that can target and kill bacteria," she replied.

"Really? That's amazing! Do you realise what that could do for

medicine in general when you get back? You make me so proud!"

Ami smiled. "Thanks, Mother."

"Sailor Moon, can you zoom in on the remains of the optical nerve please?"

The queasy-looking blonde threw her a questioning look.

"The wobbly bits over here," the doctor explained with a sigh, stabbing her index finger at the image.

Sailor Moon, who had so far successfully avoided looking directly at the magnified open injury, was forced to take a closer look. "W-wobbl- Urk!"

Ami saw her friend jump up from her chair and sprint toward the kitchen sink with a hand in front of her mouth before the crystal ball went black. About half a minute later, the image returned.

"Sorry about that," Sailor Moon said.

"No, this is my fault," Dr. Mizuno said, patting the pale girl on the head in a comforting way. "I forgot that you are not trained for this. Ami, I think we better stop. You are already keeping the wounds clean and trying to prevent infections, which is the only thing I could recommend doing from here. I will see if I can't find more specific books on eye surgery for you, though." With a fond smile, she continued "You have done great."

Ami blushed, pleased at the praise. "Well, I suppose I could show you the interesting parts of my current home instead."

"Um, I hate to interrupt," Sailor Moon said, and pointed at the clock on the wall. "But Mom will kill me if I get home any later than this!"

"Your mother doesn't know what you are up to, young lady?" Dr. Mizuno asked, putting her arms akimbo as she looked at the blonde with a stern gaze.

"Err, well... I got to go!" She made a grab for the crystal ball, but the blue-haired woman was faster.

"Can't you leave it here? There is so much I still want to tell Ami!"

"You could not use it by yourself, Mother," Ami pointed out in an apologetic voice, "it requires quite a bit of magical power to keep going."

"Is that so?" Dr. Mizuno said, sounding dejected. "I suppose it can't be helped."

"I'll visit again as soon as I can," Sailor Moon promised.

"Thank you," Dr. Mizuno said before her expression got sterner, "but *do* enter through the door next time, please!"

"Ah, yes," the blonde said, giggling nervously as she took the crystal ball from the unresisting doctor.

"I love you, Mom!" Ami cried out.

"I love you too! Take care!"

"Jadeite! Meet me in the throne room at once!"

The dark general standing on feather-covered ground smirked down at the clucking chicks before him when he heard the Empress' mental call. His gaze briefly went to the bloody scythe leaning against the stone wall behind him. Armed with what he now knew about wounds inflicted by cursed weapons, he would be able to deflect her wrath. The sacrifice of many chickens in the name of science would not be in vain! His form dissolved into black vertical lines as he teleported.

"Your Majesty," he said, bowing as he shimmered into existence before the blue-haired girl, who had returned to her super-powered form. Instead of her sailor uniform, however, she was wearing her more official Keeper outfit. A bad sign?

"Jadeite. While I do understand why you did it, I do not like having you decide important things over my head. I-"

"Wait, please," Jadeite said, raising both hands with their palms outwards in a defensive gesture. "Before you berate me for my actions, let me explain what I have been up to while you were asleep."

Sailor Mercury crossed her arms and looked up at him, her eyes narrow red slits. Nevertheless, she fell silent. "Go ahead."

"I have been working on a solution for the cursed wounds problem, and I think that I have found one."

"You have?" Mercury's features softened, and her mouth formed a little "o" of surprise.

Seeing that she was hanging onto his every word now, Jadeite continued "I performed some experiments on chickens to verify my ideas. Cursed wounds prevent healing. But what is healing? The body replacing and repairing parts it has lost. It is a gradual process." He started walking up and down, "but what if you completely bypassed this process and directly went from injury to replaced and healthy tissue?"

"You mean-" Ami said with a gasp, being able to follow his train of thought with no difficulty. "Your glamour? Will that really-"

"Yes!" Jadeite spread his arms dramatically, the cloth of his uniform fluttering in an unseen wind as his eyes started to glow white. "Observe!"

Mercury actually took a step back as she felt the pulse of magic emanating from him. He closely watched her face for her reaction. Right about now, she should be using her Keeper sight to check on the patients - patients whom he had glamoured to have their eyes back. The sight of her jaw going slack was quite satisfying, and the radiant smile that appeared on her face almost made all the effort he had spent on the pathetic humans worth it. Not that he hated them, he simply considered them beneath his attention. But if helping them made his Empress hap-

"Jadeite, that's wonderful! Thank you! Thankyouthankyouthankyou!"

A warm, soft missile impacted Jadeite's chest, and the dark general felt slender arms encircle him even as Mercury's curves pressed closer against him. Too stunned to react, he offered no resistance when the deliriously happy girl in his arms stood on tiptoes and pressed her lips onto his.

After a few silent seconds of contact, her blissfully closed eyes flew open. The dark general could see her pupils shrink into tiny pinpricks as she realised what she was doing. In an instant, she was a metre away from him, looking at the floor.

"Sorry! Jadeite, I- I don't know what- I mean- " Mercury stammered, covering her tomato-red cheeks with her hands. "I need to go check on the patients!" she squeaked. In the blink of an eye, she was gone, and Jadeite felt a weak breeze as air flowed into the vacuum she left behind.

The dark general blinked and slowly raised two fingers to his lips, touching them. A kiss. That had *not* been among the possible reactions he had considered. A small smile appeared on his face as he kept staring at the spot the girl had just vacated. It had been a rather pleasant surprise.

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No Wonder Cure

Originally on 2011-07-04T01:49:00

Ulrich sat in a chair with his head bowed, thinking. There was little else he could do, trapped and blinded as he was. In his mind, he kept reliving the horrible night when the undead came to his village. Had his sister escaped, or had the monsters gotten her too? His rolling pin had been no match for the skeletons pouring into his bakery, and in the confusion, he had only been able to catch a short glimpse of her helping his nephew out through the window. Her panicked face remained etched into his memory, since it was perhaps the last thing he had ever seen in his life.

A strange sensation shook him from his morose thoughts. It took the blind baker a few seconds to realise that the dull ache in his empty eye sockets had disappeared. He raised his shaking hands up to his face, hesitant to destroy the glimmer of hope that had blossomed in his heart. Overcome by his curiosity, he dared to brush his fingertips over the bandages covering his face. They encountered resistance where none had been before, and he could feel soft pressure in his eyeballs. Eyeballs? How did that happen? Did the dark empress...

No, better not think of the creature that had captured him and many others. Blood thundered through his veins as he fumbled with the bandages in his excitement, unable to unfasten the knot in the back properly. Losing his patience, he simply tugged at the fabric until he heard a soft tearing noise. A glimmer of light squeezing past the skewed bandage rewarded his efforts. He was no longer blind! He could really see again! With a jubilant cry, he ripped off the rest of the bandage to get a first look at his surroundings, even though he expected them to be dreadful.

He winced when bright light stung in his eyes, forcing them to close mere instants after opening. He could still perceive the brightness outside through his eyelids as a red glimmer. With some effort, he tried to blink. Painful or not, he was yearning to see again after spending the past three days in total, nightmarish darkness.

Squinting, he tried once more to make out the indistinct shape before him.

"Gah!" A girlish scream escaped his lips at the sight of two horrible red slits glowing like hellish coals just in front of his face. He jerked backwards, almost toppling his chair, and waved his arms to maintain his balance. The Keeper! The Keeper was here! Of course she would be. She was experimenting on him! Eyes didn't just regrow on their own!

The blue-haired girl in front of him straightened out of her forward-leaning position and covered her mouth with one hand, her crimson eyes wide in surprise. "Oh. Sorry for startling you!"

"I- it's nothing," Ulrich managed to blurt out through clattering teeth, avoiding eye contact. "Y-your Majesty," he added quickly, remembering the title the Keeper had extorted from the Light. His shivering increased.

"Please don't be alarmed, I am simply trying to get a better look at the state of your eyes," the dark empress said in a soothing tone of voice. "You are the first to remove your bandages."

"I am?" Ulrich dared spare a glance sideways. Now that his new eyes had adapted to the light level, he could make out the other people in the room. A few unshaven men and unkempt women in tattered clothes, as well as half a dozen children, were occupying the various cushioned couches and seats arranged around the walls of the room. Their sparse conversation had guttered out the moment they had heard the Keeper's voice, but all of them were in various stages of removing their bandages.

"Is it true? We are really healed?" a woman in the back asked in a shaky voice.

"I hope so, but I'm still trying to properly determine that," Empress Mercury answered. "Can you see me properly?" she asked Ulrich. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

The man returned his attention to the deceptively harmless-looking girl in front of him. If he focused only on her voice, he could

associate it with the healer who had been caring for all of them during the journey. It helped him block out somewhat how much of a threat the black and golden-clad girl really was. Oh, she was waiting for an answer. "F-four, your Majesty."

She smiled, nodding once. "Good! Now, what about depth perception? Um, what could I use..."

While she turned her head to search the spacious chamber for something appropriate, Ulrich dared take a closer look at her. She was shorter than her reputation would have led him to believe, and for some reason, her face was almost as red as her eyes. It was hard to believe that someone like her could defeat the Avatar, or even a horned reaper. Shuddering again, he surveyed the room. He twisted his neck slowly and tried to avoid drawing attention to himself, not unlike a man locked into a room with a large and hungry dragon. Cold sweat ran down his neck as he remembered that the dark empress was much more dangerous than any such beast.

The room didn't help set Ulrich's mind at ease, either. He thought that the designer had gone for a warm, cosy feel, only to struggle mightily with the concept and suffer defeat. The rounded forms of the furniture and the thick, soft carpet were a good start, yes, but the problem was its pattern. Large, dark red splotches that looked like pools of spilled blood did not make for a friendly, relaxing atmosphere. Not to mention that they clashed horribly with the blue and white colour scheme of the walls. At least, the general brightness of the room was comforting - or it would have been, had not the flower-shaped lamp bristled with icicle-like spikes. The huge thing looked ready to pounce on the first person incautious enough to step underneath it.

"Oh, pay no mind to the decoration, please," the dark empress' voice interrupted his inspection, making his heart skip a beat. She had been following his gaze. "The dungeon heart has its own ideas about how things should look like, and keeping these cosmetic adjustments at bay is more effort than it is worth. In any case, you seem to be able to see just fine."

Ulrich heard a few of his fellow prisoners gasp at the mention of a dungeon heart. He didn't react though, since having the Keeper

staring at him as if he was an insect under a magnifying glass was much worse than a reminder that he really was in a dungeon. As he watched, the Empress did something to her right ear, summoning strange glasses. Looking closer, he saw unknown runes slide over their insides.

"Please hold still."

The baker froze, terrified by the slight frown that had appeared on the dark empress' face.

"Strange, this-" She paused and looked up, her expression turning into one of plain annoyance. "Oh, *no*." A wave of her hand later, an ugly imp in blue coveralls appeared before her, missing its helmet and rubbing the bumps on its forehead.

Or is that her forehead? From Ulrich's point of view, the tiny worker looked vaguely female. Not that he was an expert on imp anatomy.

"Everyone, leave the imps alone!"

Mercury's voice echoed through Ulrich's mind, and presumably through the minds of everyone else, too. He could see some of the children look around wide-eyed to find the source of the reprimand, while the adults were quietly backing away from the blue-haired girl, their faces pale.

"I understand that you are scared and angry, but taking it out on the imps is not a solution! They bring you food and drink and have orders not to bother you!" With a sigh, the Empress returned her attention to Ulrich. "I hope they will listen to me. The imps can get rather nasty when provoked."

The tiny creature at her feet nodded vigorously, baring dull teeth in a crooked grin.

"We w-wouldn't think of disobeying you, Empress Mercury-"

"Eeeeeep!"

Startled, Ulrich turned in the direction of the frightened scream to see a tiny girl in the process of trying to crawl under a table. Since

she was looking wide-eyed in his direction, she bumped her head into one of its legs.

The dark empress blinked at the child in surprise. "Are you-"

The child froze like a startled deer as she noticed her stare, and burst into tears. "Whaaaah! S-stay away!" the little redhead sobbed. "I have been good! Don't eat me!"

Mercury twitched as if she wanted to walk over there, but apparently thought better of it. She slumped slightly, a movement betrayed only by the slight swaying of the golden bands hanging from her epaulettes. It looked as if she was letting out a toneless sigh, nonplussed and annoyed.

Ulrich stared. Was she actually taking offence to parents telling their children she would come and eat them if they didn't behave?

"I'm not going to eat you. Or anyone," the empress tried, her voice more gentle than the recently-healed baker would have thought possible. Not that it helped. The frightened girl remained stubbornly under the table, staring at her with scared eyes.

"Do you want some cookies?" Mercury tried again. A few seconds later, an earthenware plate with a few golden-brown sweets on it appeared before the child, who scuttled backwards in surprise and didn't touch them.

Ulrich couldn't fault her for that. He'd never have sold such shoddy-looking pastries at his shop.

Looking sad, Mercury turned back to her patient. "Where were we? Ah, right. Please don't blink, I need to analyse your eyes."

Ulrich felt his eyes starting to water as he strained to comply with her instructions. Who knew that not blinking could be so hard when your life depended on it?

"Hmm, that's strange," the dark empress muttered, frowning more deeply now.

"Is something wrong with your spell, your Majesty?" Ulrich asked,

his worry about losing his sight again overriding his self-preservation instinct for the moment. "N-not that I'm not grateful for you healing all of us!"

"Oh, that wasn't me, that was one of my subordinates," Mercury explained, her cheeks flushing again for some inexplicable reason."I'm currently trying to find out what exactly he did."

An underling did this? Ulrich boggled. Restoring so many eyes at once would give even the most powerful priests some trouble, and one of her servants was able to do it? Had she corrupted a mighty servant of the Light? Or, given that she didn't know how he had done it, had an undercover agent just given himself away in order to help him and the other victims?

"This could be trouble," Mercury muttered before deactivating her visor. "Thanks for your cooperation, I have to go talk to him now." She inclined her head and disappeared.

Ulrich let out a relieved breath and slumped into his chair like a boneless heap.

"Hey! You all right over there?" a large man in slightly tattered peasant garb asked. When the baker did not react, he continued in a hushed voice "Was that really the Dark Empress herself?"

Ulrich nodded mutely.

"Her looks sure don't match her reputation. Glad it wasn't me she was staring at like that." The fluffy-bearded brute approached with a few deft steps. "She looked like she wanted to carve you up like a pig to see how you work," he added as he extended one hand. "Robin."

Ulrich shook his hand with little enthusiasm. "Ulrich. I know what you mean," he answered, throwing a cautious glance back at the empty spot where the Keeper had stood. "I'm glad that's over."

"So, where do you come from? My home village-"

"Hey!" an indignant childish voice called out. "That's mine!"

Both men stopped what they were doing to look at the speaker. The imp had scuttled over to the redheaded girl underneath the table, and was now engaged in a tug of war with her. Both had their hands on the plate of cookies and refused to let go.

"They have orders to not bother you," Robin repeated the words of the dark empress in a sarcastic tone of voice. "They aren't very good at following orders, are they?"

"That's not terribly reassuring," Ulrich said, wiping the sweat from his brow. His mood brightened slightly when the child suddenly gathered up the cookies with one hand and let go, causing the bug-eyed creature to fall on its backside.

The imp let out an angry squeal when the girl scampered with her prize, and gave chase.

"Let's do something about this before it gets out of hand," Robin said, dragging the reluctant baker toward the enraged creature.

"Jadeite? Jadeite! Ah, here you are!" Ami said when she found the dark general in the living room. She could feel her cheeks heat up when she remembered the kiss she had stolen, and didn't meet his eyes. *No, pull yourself together! You have more important things to think about!*

"Yes, your Majesty?" the curly-haired blond answered as he got up from the couch and inclined his head in greeting.

"Jadeite, your glamour solution is not permanent! Those restored eyes aren't real and need constant upkeep, or they'll fade away!"

"I know," Jadeite answered, surprising Ami with how unconcerned he sounded. "Don't worry, it won't be a problem. Even though the number of eyes is high, the total volume the glamour affects is so low that it won't be much of a strain for me. I'll just maintain it for a few days until their bodies have replaced all the glamour stuff with regular matter, and then they'll be good as new. Youma sometimes do a similar thing to survive life-threatening wounds."

"Um, Jadeite," Ami said, discouraged by what she was hearing, "did you take into account that humans heal much more slowly than youma?"

"Not really, no. How much longer does it take?"

"I have no exact data, but I would say that the general timescale would be measured in years," Ami said. She almost cringed when Jadeite's eyes widened in shock.

"Are you serious?" The grey uniformed man started pacing around, looking alarmed. "Pathetic humans. Can't they do anything right?"

Ami was more concerned with the health of her, for lack of a better word, guests. "For how long can you keep maintaining the glamour?" The idea of all of these recently-restored eyes popping into non-existence at the same time was nausea-inducing.

"Forever. Duration is not the problem," Jadeite said, sounding irritated. "Range is. If they wander too far away from me, the spell will unravel after a while."

Ami perked up. "How long a distance are we talking about here?"

"A few kilometres. That will be limiting my mobility and usefulness by quite a lot. Should I make arrangements to end the spell in a controlled way?"

"NO!" Ami blurted out. "That would be cruel! Don't even think about it!" A bit more calmly, she added "I'll try to find a different solution for this. Perhaps I can speed up their metabolism in the affected areas, or find a way to remove the curse. There must be some kind of solution!"

"As you wish. However, that means you will have to keep them from leaving," Jadeite pointed out, crossing his arms.

"Yes, they would lose their eyes if they returned home, unless you- no, that wouldn't work. They aren't all from the same town, or even the same country." The blue-haired girl looked at the ground, saddened by the new complication. "Oh, and don't worry, I won't consider you less useful just because you will need to remain here,"

Ami said with a reassuring smile. "I consider what you are doing right now extremely important. Besides, you can work on recovering more youma from the temple in the meantime."

Jadeite's expression softened, and he nodded once. "There is also the problem of the fairies trying to rescue your so-called prisoners. They asked for my cooperation during the journey, but it's possible that they would try even without it."

"And you didn't think to tell me about that before?" Ami asked a bit louder than normal.

"You weren't particularly interested in hearing anything that didn't directly relate to healing the captives at the time," the grey-uniformed man pointed out in a level voice.

He had a point there, Ami had to admit. "Yes. I was really making your life difficult then, wasn't I? I apologise."

"No need," Jadeite answered quickly, although she could discern the faint surprise in his tone. "The fairies' plan actually consists of asking the Avatar to link them into the hero gate network on this continent so they can transport the captives to waiting ships or flying carpets."

"I see." Ami thought about his words for a few seconds. Thanks to Jadeite's glamour, none of the remaining problems were really urgent. "I think it might be best to properly discuss the implications of all this with the others. Oh, and the recent mission too."

"Now that is something I can get fully behind," Jadeite said with a faint smile.

"Ah, Keeper Sinistra," Mukrezar said. He snorted once as blood from his split upper lip ran down into his right nostril. "Not coming to visit me in person?"

The dark mistress with red-glowing eyes furrowed her brow at the figure chained upside-down to a wheel-shaped torture device against the wall. "After your dummy blew up the troops I sent after you? Dream on."

"I think your smirk is making her angry, Master!"

The bare-chested elf coughed as the smoke from his long, pink hair burning in the basin of coals below him itched within his lungs. "Ah, well. You did make me wait for *hours*. I had to amuse myself somehow. It was a nice sneak attack though. Very professional, well-trained underlings. Well, they were, anyway. Ouch!"

"Poor form. Her swinging technique has nothing on yours, your Violence!

"I could- ow - manage very well without your commentary."

Sinistra struck him again, the impact of the metal bar leaving a sizeable bruise on his skin. "And then you led the next group into that horde of blood-thirsty bounty hunters," the Keeper hissed.

"That is *hardly* my fault," the captured elf replied when his eyes focused again. "If *someone* hadn't wasted my time like tha- Ow!"

"You were really asking for it this time."

"Didn't I tell you to shut up?"

"Hmm? No."

"You are so very lucky that I want to learn all of your secrets before I hand in your broken body," the woman clad in black leather said, leaning forward as she dipped her metal rod into the glowing coals.

"Oh, it's looking as if she is getting serious now. This is the greatest entertainment I have had in years, Master!"

"No pain, no gain. Though it doesn't need to be quite this much pain."

"I am, however, surprised that you indeed showed up to this little date you arranged." She frowned when the pink-haired man's eyes went glassy, and slapped his cheek.

"Uh, huh, what?" he stuttered. "Sorry, drifted off there. The agony, you know..." Mukrezar's voice was somewhat strained.

"I said that I am surprised that a former Keeper of your reputation would be stupid enough to show up in person! What did you expect would happen?"

"This, pretty much. Actually, things are all going according to my plan." Despite Mukrezar's battered state, the grin that appeared on his face caused the other Keeper to take a step back. "Would you like to know what it is?"

"Sorry for being late," Cathy said as she stormed in through the door of the briefing room, panting. "I was just up on the surface. Do you know that one of your airships is missing? The warlocks asked me for permission to have a look at them earlier, and now one is gone!"

"What?" Ami looked at the ceiling, even though her Keeper sight required no such motion to see straight to the land above. What were they thinking? They didn't know the first thing about flying a dirigible!

"Don't worry about it," the striped youma sitting between Jadeite and Jered at the round table said. "I sent it back to Dreadfog Island yesterday. No reason not to properly loot the place."

"You did that without asking me first?" Ami asked, staring in surprise at the youma that resembled her like a sister.

Tiger steadied her elbows on the table and rested her chin on her hands as she returned the stare. "You *did* delegate the day-to-day operation of the dungeon to me, remember? Thus, I allocated resources where they were the most useful."

"All right," Ami nodded, "give me a list of who and what you sent, and then-"

She was interrupted by the crystal ball on the table starting to light up, and eagerly summoned it to her side. "Mom?" she muttered softly under her breath.

Tiger, sitting on the other side of the table, still overheard her and went rigid, giving the brightening sphere her full attention.

Ami's face fell when the scrying device revealed the features of the user at the other end of the connection. "Keeper Midori."

"How nice of you to remember me! Were you expecting someone else?" the Keeper wearing the elvish face of Princess Julia replied.

"What do you want?" Ami asked bluntly, hoping that the nosy woman would leave her alone if she ignored her questions.

"To chat and brag, mostly. Oh, and to demand my payment. Don't worry, it won't cost you much at all! But first, have a look at this! Isn't it a pretty sight?"

The viewpoint on the crystal ball zoomed out, revealing more of the elven princess. She was lounging on a set of green pillows padding the interior of a huge open clam on top of a long set of stairs.

The perspective shifted away even further, and Ami realised that the roof above the other Keeper was formed by the neck and chin of an enormous statue that reminded her of the Egyptian sphinx. Unlike its ancient counterpart, this sculpture was standing and had the body of a dragon. The mouth of its human face opened into a wide, round yawn. "It certainly looks unique," Ami said, too well-behaved to comment about the strange proportions of the thing. Her eyes widened a bit when the cave walls moved. Looking lower, she saw a veritable army of orcs pulling the construct with thick chains. "It's mobile?"

"I do like travelling in style," Midori said, "but I assume the sights over there will be of more interest to you."

The image in the crystal ball changed again, this time to show various creatures, most of them imps, swarm like ants over a large hill of dark-coloured debris. Gold and silver gleamed in the bags of the returning ones. Had Midori destroyed some kind of underground stronghold? The young empress gasped when she spotted a broken obsidian skull in the rubble. Suddenly, she recognised the demolished ziggurat, even though it looked very different without green light falling in from the ceiling. "You destroyed a temple of Crowned Death?"

"I'm not one to pass up a great opportunity when it presents itself. However, let's talk about my payment first." Midori rubbed her hands together.

"I neither asked for your help, nor did I agree to-"

"You have a great thing going there with being an Empress and everything. I want in on it," the crimson-eyed elf said, paying no mind to Ami's objection.

"Excuse me?" Ami raised an eyebrow in response. "What, exactly, do you mean with that?"

"Award me a nice, legitimate noble title, Empress!" Midori replied with a wide grin. "It's well within your rights to do so, I checked. I have always wanted to be a King, but a Grand Duke will do too, for now!"

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Surprise Guest

Originally on 2011-07-10T23:14:00

Of all the possible things Midori could ask for, Ami hadn't expected a request for a noble title. "Make you a Grand Duke?" she repeated, her face incredulous. On one side, it would cost her nothing. On the other, this could have implications she wasn't aware of.

Across the table, both Cathy and Jered were shaking their heads silently, apparently in agreement with her thoughts.

She would need to discuss the situation with them later, in particular since it had not occurred to her yet that she even *could* hand out noble titles. Time to get rid of Midori, then. "First, your unsolicited services hardly merit a reward such as the one you are asking for," Ami said. "Second," she gestured toward the devastation shown by the crystal ball, "you have already profited greatly from me weakening Crowned Death's forces. And third, why should I even give you such a high position?"

Princess Julia's face split into a shark-like grin. "You should pay me because the cost of doing so is always smaller than of not doing so."

A snort came from Cathy's side of the table. "Oh no, another Keeper is threatening us. Whatever shall we do?"

Midori completely ignored the blonde. "This is particularly true when the cost to you is absolutely nothing, such as in this case. Don't worry about granting land to go with my title. I am completely capable of acquiring that myself. In addition, I may even be inclined to act like a proper vassal in order to keep my title. A net profit for you. Sweet deal, isn't it?"

Ami remained sceptical. The thought of having another Keeper working under her left a bad taste in her mouth. She had seen no evidence so far that Midori wasn't a total monster like all the others. During their first conversation, Midori had asked for interesting people in exchange for information, which hinted at quite the

opposite. Besides, taking even partial responsibility for the actions of someone like that was not something she wanted to do. On the more pragmatic side of the equation, she couldn't deny that Midori's cooperation would be a strategic asset. Not with a ruined temple of the death god as evidence. And perhaps she could protect people by curbing the other Keeper's excesses?

"As for the reason why you should give me the highest noble title, well," the elven princess in the crystal ball stapled her fingers, "it's pretty simple. You are *not* going to find anyone more competent than me!"

"What about Mukrezar?" Jered asked, leaning forward so he could better see the princess shown by the scrying device. Ami could tell from his tone that he wasn't serious and merely making life difficult for the possessed woman.

"Oh, please. As if he'd ever work for someone else," the Keeper dismissed the notion. "And Empress, you really need to teach your minions some manners. Interfering in a conversation with their betters like that, it's the height of-"

"Keeper Midori," the blue-haired girl interrupted, "I will not be pressured into making an important decision without analysing all aspects first. Consider our conversation here over."

"Aww, not going to barter some more, Empress?" Midori's inflection added subtle mockery to the title. "Very well. Take all the time you want. Not my problem if information you could have acted on reaches you too late." Chuckling, the red-eyed elf disappeared from the sphere, which went inert.

Ami kept staring at the orb in silence, feeling unsettled by the other Keeper's parting words.

"What was that about?" Cathy asked, her face mirroring Ami's unease.

"Mind games, most likely," Tiger commented. The striped youma raised herself half out of her chair and narrowed her eyes at the black-clad teenager. "Mercury," she began in an insincerely sweet

tone of voice, "why would you be expecting 'Mom' to appear in the crystal ball? Have you been in contact with her?"

Ami turned her head to look at the youma and blinked. "Yes, actually," she said with a happy smile, "Sailor Moon assisted her with her crystal ball earlier, and-"

"And you didn't say anything?" Tiger all but screamed.

Ami paused. Belatedly, she remembered that Tiger shared a large part of her memories. "Oh, sorry. Did you want to talk to her too? I'could explain-"

"No! Let's talk about the more pressing things first!" Tiger said and sat down at once.

Rather confused now, Ami blinked again. The youma was definitely sending mixed signals. "But-"

"Mukrezar, for example! You haven't done anything about him yet, even though he was important enough for Crowned Death to raise him from the dead!"

"Um, okay." Ami grabbed the crystal ball, deciding that the youma had a valid point. She focused on the pink-haired elf she had briefly encountered on Dreadfog Island, prompting the crystal ball to glow brightly as she searched for him.

"Recent surveillance of him has been pretty boring," Tiger continued. "So far, he has just been moping around in a cave underneath the ocean somewhere on the other side of the planet."

"This doesn't look like a cave," Ami said while peering into the crystal ball.

Chair legs scraped over the floor as her comment prompted the others to get up and crowd around her. Within moments, the wall of curious advisers around her cast a shadow over her.

"Well, that's new," Jered commented, scratching his chin as he watched the long-haired elf climb over the flank of a white-scaled dragon with eyes like burning coals.

"He seems to be enjoying himself tremendously," Cathy commented, snickering.

The look on Mukrezar's face could have curdled milk as he moved a metal-toothed comb across the beast's scales, prying out moss and lichen.

"Is that an icicle hanging from his nose?" Jadeite asked, clearly amused by the sight of the shivering ex-Keeper.

Ami started at the proximity of his voice. So that was him leaning against the back of her chair. "He appears to be in some sort of dungeon. Wait, I'll see if I can locate it."

The viewpoint shifted, rising toward the ceiling of the chamber, past the smoothed walls covered with a veil of icicles. The picture went dark as its point of origin rose through solid ground. A while later, the image turned pure white.

"Snow," Ami said as she zoomed out further, discovering a wind-swept valley between two steep mountains. Going higher proved useless, since the cloud cover barred her view of the snow-covered mountain range below. "Does anyone recognise the area?" she asked with little hope for a positive answer.

"Looks like a place in the north, that's the only place you would find snow at this time of the year," Cathy said. "No idea where exactly, though," she added with a shrug.

"Jered, please get two warlocks to scry on the place to see if they can localise it more precisely," Ami decided as she shoved the crystal ball away.

"On it," the wavy-haired man agreed. His gaze unfocused and his right eye glowed faintly, indicating that he was using a communication spell to find the right people to assign to the task.

"Mukrezar doesn't look as if he's stirring up trouble right now, let's focus for the moment on problems closer to home, such as the patients." Ami continued. She dreaded having to inform them about the limitations of their cure.

"Oh, Mercury," Cathy said, pausing on the way back to her seat. "That reminds me. Could I have five of the warlocks assigned to me for an hour during one week, please?"

"What for?" Ami asked. Was there a mischievous gleam in the swordswoman's eyes?

"Well, I have an experiment in mind that could prove potentially useful," the blonde said.

Ami listened attentively as the blonde started to explain her theory.

"Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Screams were nothing special in the Underworld, and most of the trolls, orcs, and goblins seated at the tavern's worn tables paid this one no mind. Fiz, a scruffy goblin well on the way to getting drunk, was an exception. He grinned and jabbed his right elbow into the side of the mummed figure sitting next to him at the counter.

The black-clad man, possibly a rogue of some sort, let out a startled "Wha?" at the touch, and his head rose from its lowered position.

Fiz cursed inwardly. Had he known that his neighbour had nodded off., he would have filched his purse. "Me said, hear that?" he grumbled, twitching his pointed ears in the direction of the scream. It had not cut off yet, and seemed to be getting closer.

"What about it?" his conversation partner muttered and tapped his fingers against the empty beer mug in front of him absently.

"Well, it long. And loud. And coming here."

"Your powers of observation are astounding," the man replied, sounding vaguely irritated.

While Fiz was still trying to figure out if he had just been insulted - he wasn't so good with the big words - the screamer reached the tavern. Its heavy door flew open, startling the dour barmaid, whom Fiz may have found attractive if she hadn't been two heads taller

than him and human to boot.

The woman jumped backwards, narrowly avoiding the rapidly-moving wooden surface. It still managed to tag her serving tray and ripped it from her hands. If the shattering and splashing sounds weren't enough to rouse the drunks out of their stupor, then the loud bang of the door impacting the wall certainly was. "You!" the barmaid glowered at the troll whose scream was only now dying down for lack of breath.

Fiz giggled in anticipation. She was a dark mistress down on her luck, and would certainly give that fool with the blood-shot eyes a reason to scream even louder!

The greenskin completely ignored the glowering barmaid as he whirled in place, though. His feet splashed through the puddle of bad ale on the floor as he lunged for the door and slammed it shut. In the same motion, he grabbed the arm-thick iron latch affixed to the door frame and moved it across the entrance, barring it. That accomplished, he leaned with his back against the wood and stared into the chamber. Widened eyes rolled wildly as he addressed the room. "He's coming! He's coming!"

The dozen or so creatures within the establishment looked at him in silence, the flickering shadows cast by the torches on the walls the only movement within the room.

"Don't just sit there like fucking retards! Help me bar the door before he gets here!" the troll shouted, his voice high-pitched with panic. He darted over to the closest table and started dragging it toward the entrance, much to the dismay of the three orcs whose drinks he had just overturned.

"*Who* is coming?" the burly leader of the trio said as he got up slowly and deliberately, exuding menace with every movement.

"The damned Avatar himself!" the troll answered while he wedged the table in place by leaning a chair against it.

"The Avatar? You idiot! What would he want *here*?" The pink-skinned creature challenged.

Fiz found the possibility of the Avatar showing up here about as unlikely as it was terrifying. It couldn't be possible, could it? There was nothing in this backwater that would be worth his time. Especially since he could just go through the portal and find a proper Keeper to smite instead. Yet, the goblin's fine ears could make out alarming noises outside, even through the thick walls. "Wait! Listen!" he found himself saying.

To his surprise, the other creatures obeyed. In the silence, they could hear the muffled noises of doors slamming shut and creatures crying out in fear. The clientèle of the tavern exchanged nervous glances.

"Those are h-hoof-beats?" a nervous goblin asked.

"Nobody here uses horses!" one of the orcs blurted out, paling. "What should we do?"

"Help me barricade the door, you worthless fools!" the troll who had burst in earlier shouted, struggling to drag a wall cupboard towards the door.

"Right!"

Stirred into action by fear, the Underworld denizens started piling up furniture in front of the entrance, cursing and shouting as they got into each other's way.

Fiz was about to do his part when he noticed that the man he was sitting next to was not reacting at all. Probably dozed off again. The goblin looked back at the door, then at the man. How could he sleep through this noise? Oh well, opportunity! Fiz's greedy fingers brushed softly over the coarse fabric of his neighbour's cloak, searching for the tell-tale bulge of a well-filled purse.

"That's the last of them," the orc leader said, brushing the sweat off his brow with the back of his calloused hand as he admired the pile of chairs and tables hiding the door. "Nobody's going to come in through there!"

Outside, a horse snorted, and the creatures hiding within the tavern

could hear clanking armour. The trolls, orcs, and goblins retreated to the back of the now empty room, closer to the counter.

"Don't worry, lads, this is the sturdiest building in town! Nobody's getting in or out of here!"

"That," the mummed man said, startling Fiz and causing him to withdraw his hand as if burnt, "is extremely reassuring, with you blockading the exit like that. I dare say it would be a bit inconvenient if someone decided to, for example, set fire to this fine establishment."

Fiz didn't find that idea funny. Certainly not funny enough to start chuckling like that. He wondered if the man had been doing drugs, and if he would be willing to share.

One of the nervous trolls turned to glare at the dark-clad figure. "You think that's amusing? Shut up or I'll show you something really amusing!" He cracked his knuckles threateningly.

Fiz didn't want to be caught in a brawl and considered bailing behind the counter, but before he could, the wall exploded inwards. A fist-sized piece of spinning rock smacked him in the temple and knocked him off his seat. Lying on his back, he stared up at the cloud of dust that was spreading through the room and coating the surprised creatures with a fine, white layer. The goblin groaned, disoriented by the lights the pain made dance before his eyes. No, wait, the lights were real and coming from the horrible, armoured figure in red and yellow that was striding in through the opening.

Fiz heard a piteous noise, and noticed that he had started whimpering. It couldn't be! That was the Avatar! The almost invincible champion of the Light! Why did he have to come in *here*?

"WHERE IS HE?" the Avatar's voice boomed from underneath his pot helmet, making its metal vibrate from sheer volume. He stepped into the room, and the monsters in his path backed away.

The largest orc, whose knees were bumping against each other uncontrollably, bravely spoke up. "Err, who is it that you are..." he trailed off when he noticed the other armoured figures behind the

Avatar.

One of the knights was holding a crystal ball and extended his index finger. The monsters in the room parted before the pointed digit as if it was the business end of an angry warlock's staff. Finally, the finger's clockwise motion came to a rest. "Over there."

Fiz thought he would faint when he saw that the knight was pointing right at him. Why? What had he done? He couldn't remember robbing or stabbing anyone important lately! It wasn't fair!

"Ah, you are finally here."

Fiz froze. That was the voice of the mummed man, coming from behind him. Reluctantly, he tore his gaze off the Avatar and looked up, just in time to see the bandages and cowl go flying, revealing an elvish face with pink hair. The goblin was now entirely sure that the man was crazy, because he was chuckling.

Mukrezar smirked "Just as I planned, you-"

That was as far as he got before the Avatar's two-handed sword cut off his words, along with his head. Hot blood splattered over the goblin on the ground.

Fiz gaped. He hadn't even seen the armoured man move. Just a blur, and suddenly blood everywhere. Frozen and shocked, he wished with all his might that the terrifying man would ignore him. From his perspective on the ground, he had a good view of the headless corpse slumping off its seat and dropping to the floor, almost landing on him. Despite his desire to remain quiet and unnoticed, he let out a strangled yelp when the bloody remains started moving and writhing like a nest of snakes.

Moving with supernatural speed, the champion of Light speared the corpse straight through the heart as soon as it started moving, pinning it to the floor with his sword.

The body kept shuddering and shrunk, its clothing slithering across its form as it merged with the skin, which started to take on a suspiciously green tint.

With a start, Fiz realised that what the sword was pinning to the ground had turned into a headless goblin. While he stared, a golden ring on the corpse's left hand flared and turned white-hot. Surrounded by a cloud of black smoke, it seared off the finger as it melted and turned into ash, leaving nothing but the sickening smell of charred flesh behind. An incoherent howl of absolute rage drew his attention back to the Avatar looming above him, sword raised high in the air. The goblin's ears drooped.

The weapon came down on the corpse with a tearing sound, cutting deep into the wooden floor again and again as the Avatar vented his anger.

Fiz re-opened his eyes, surprised that he was still alive. Since playing dead while the Avatar was throwing a tantrum bad enough to make him hack apart a fallen opponent seemed suicidal, the goblin jumped to his feet and sprinted toward the hole in the wall. He didn't even look back when he raced past the stunned guards to see if they would pursue.

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A Scheme Pays Off

Originally on 2011-07-17T01:54:00

Ami walked slowly through the vast new wing she had added to the dungeon during the journey back from the undead-infested island, her nose buried in the new section's blueprints. For a rush job, designed while she was busy caring for too many patients, it was functional enough. There was, however, a huge difference between functional and good, she thought as her eyes wandered over the dull and featureless grey walls of the corridor. With its rectangular angles and bright lamps in regular intervals, this place exuded all the cheerfulness of a military bunker.

Still, a few children ahead defied the place's drabness by playing tag to pass time, and Ami smiled as she watched them over the upper edge of her reading material. She heard the footsteps of Cathy, Jered, and Tiger stop a moment after hers did.

"Hey! Some warning next time before you stop for no good reason!" Tiger complained from very close behind Ami, and a hand with striped skin briefly steadied itself against her shoulder as the youma tried to avoid bumping into her.

Reacting to the youma's loud protest, the playing children looked up from their game and noticed the approaching group. A boy who looked about seven years old briefly met Ami's eyes, and she could see the colour flee from his face. With a frightened yelp, he grabbed his younger friends by the arms and pulled them along as he ran off.

Ami's shoulders sagged as she watched them flee toward the steady stream of adults commuting between the bath and their accommodations.

"Don't take it too hard," Cathy said gently. "They haven't gotten to know you yet and don't know any better."

"Thanks." Ami directed a brief smile at the taller blonde standing to her right, grateful for the comforting words. She approached one of

the doors branching off from the straight corridor and opened it a hand's width, revealing a room the size of sports hall and supported by massive pillars. She didn't want to disturb the groups of people sitting around the blankets on the ground within, chatting softly with each other, so she only took a brief look. She couldn't make out more than sentence fragments in the general murmuring, but the tone of the conversations seemed fearful and depressed. With a quiet sigh, she closed the door.

"I'm a bit unsure why you have us inspect the place manually, rather than simply using your Keeper Sight," Jered pointed out. "Certainly, that would be faster?"

"I need to know what actually walking around down here is like in order to better understand what these people might need," Ami explained as she started walking down the corridor again. "I might also miss non-obvious things if I only viewed the place remotely."

"Ah, like the smell," Cathy said with a grimace.

Tiger pinched her nose shut with an exaggerated gesture. "*I* wouldn't mind missing the smell."

"Yes, that's one of the problems I might not have noticed," Ami said. "I'm already trying to figure out how to best improve air circulation. Fortunately, the dungeon heart makes sure that there's no risk of asphyxiation, no matter the air quality." Designing improved ventilation wasn't exactly an easy task, as Ami wasn't a proper architect and had to figure things out as she went along. Perhaps there was a real one among the abductees who could assist her?

She returned to her initial train of thought, the slapdash nature of this part of the dungeon. The huge halls were a suitable emergency sleeping place for blind people, but they had never been intended as long-term solution. Before she could decide on a suitable replacement, however, she would have to ask the recently 'cured' patients what they wanted and needed. Among other things. "I need an amphitheatre or similar room where I can see and address them all at once," she said, deep in thought.

"Get them to the surface and sit on a big rock. Quick, cheap,

effective," Jered suggested.

"I don't want to use the surface," Ami said, shaking her head. "If someone attacked, I wouldn't be able to get everyone out of danger fast enough. Keeper transport works fine when I only have to move a handful of my warriors, but it's too slow to move eight thousand individuals. Remember, it took me hours just to get them from the cargo holds to the underground chambers."

"Well, they are healthier now. You wouldn't have to treat them like fragile little eggs this time," Tiger pointed out.

"There's also a different problem," Ami said, actually putting down her reading material and looking around before she continued in a hushed voice. "Because they are not locked up and regained their sight, the dungeon heart no longer considers them captives. While that's a good thing, it also means that I can't act directly on them any more."

Jered shifted his weight into a more alert stance, his right hand brushing over his dagger-filled bandoleer reassuringly. "Joy. That means you can't even keep track of them unless you are paying attention to the area, right? Someone *could* potentially launch some kind of surprise attack at us."

"I think they are still too weak and intimidated to consider something like that," Ami said.

"You are underestimating the risks that desperate people are willing to take," Jered said, his eyes alert. "You are using your Keeper Sight on this area, right? I mean, how else would you be walking and reading at the same time without bumping into anything?" the wavy-haired man asked.

"Practice," Ami said with a mischievous smile.

"Don't worry, I'll protect you!" Cathy joked, wrapping an arm around Jered's shoulder before he could say anything else. "I'm all better now that I'm back in this frilly uniform!" She tugged at the hem of her very short skirt playfully. "Though I think I preferred your outfit when it was white and blue, Mercury. Oh, by the way," the playfulness

disappeared from the blonde's features, "I have to report an incident with one of the new recruits that happened yesterday. One of the orcs tried to kill me during a spar to take my place."

Ami stumbled and turned to look at Cathy. Wide-eyed, she let her gaze wander up and down the tall woman's body, searching for traces of injury. "Are you all right? What happened?"

"I'm unhurt," the blonde reassured the teenager, "but the bastard who attacked me isn't. Snyder thinks he has about a fifty-fifty chance of surviving. I thought you should know in case he stays alive and you need to decide on a punishment."

"I see," Ami said quietly, dreading the prospect. Why couldn't her employees just do as they were told and not fight each other? "I better remind everyone about the rules." Closing her eyes, she focused on broadcasting a telepathic message with her communication spell. She hesitated at the last moment. Would her guests receive it too? Probably. Non-targeted messages were a bit like shouting loudly at some destination area. *"This is Empress Mercury speaking,"* she introduced herself. *"I was recently made aware of the fact that some of you seem to have forgotten the rules. I am reminding everyone that I disapprove of infighting. To clarify: attacking or killing your superiors will not get you their position, but a punishment instead."*

"Oh, really convincing," Tiger commented. "A punishment. That's going to scare them straight. You need to be more forceful! Tell them that you'll make them wish they hadn't broken your rules! That's just as vague, but at least it sounds as if you had a clue about what you were going to do to them!"

Ami frowned at the blue-haired youma. "I actually have an idea about how to deal with disciplinary problems, but I still need to research the details. Later. When the people here are comfortable."

"Oh, really?" Tiger crossed her arms. "*That,* I'm looking forward to see."

Ignoring the mockery, Ami turned back to Cathy. "I'm sorry something like that happened."

"Don't worry about it, no lasting harm was done. Well, unless you count the clothes I was wearing at the time. Actually, with all the magic outfit-changing, I'm down to one regular set. Do you think we could go shopping or get some local production going?"

"Maybe you should go see that dark elf tailor in the mushroom city," Jered suggested with a leer, jumping aside even before his girlfriend could elbow him in the ribs.

Ami almost blushed at the reminder of Underworld fashion. "Local production sounds like a good idea. I'll see what I can do." She looked back to her blueprints. "Maybe if I put the congress hall here-"

"Watch out!" someone shouted behind the group.

"Snyder?" Startled, Ami turned her head to look back over her shoulder. Her eyes widened when she saw a group of imps bearing down on her, brandishing huge paintbrushes and pulling a rattling cart filled with buckets. "Gah!" She jumped aside and pressed herself flat against the wall, seeing Cathy and Tiger do the same on the opposite side of the corridor.

The cart rushed through between them, leaving a trail of colourful paint splatters in its wake.

To Ami's left, Jered stared at his shoes with a cranky expression. "What are those imps up to?" he asked Ami, who was still staring after the rocking contraption, blinking and hiding her mouth behind her hand. "Um, they are supposed to paint street signs so the people here can navigate the corridors more easily."

"They certainly are enthusiastic," Tiger commented, apparently not caring about the droplet of red paint that had struck the tip of her nose.

"They are a menace, that is what they are!" Snyder said as he approached rapidly. The folds of his robe were swishing around his legs with each step, making the colourful blotches marring the white cloth sway wildly.

Ami took one look at the acolyte's sour expression and said "I'll make sure to give them more instructions about *how* I want things done next time. Usually, I don't have to worry about work safety with them, but this bunch seems more aggressive than what I am used to." Could this be a side effect of using Metallia's energy to create them? *Perhaps I need to calibrate the amount of dark power that goes into them even more finely to get more stable results?* "I hope they didn't give you too much trouble."

"Yeah, you look pretty terrible," Tiger commented on the dark rings underneath the redhead's eyes, apparently feeling no need to be polite. It earned her a reproachful look from Ami.

Snyder, however, didn't seem to care. "Indeed, indeed. However, that has very little to do with the imps and very much with my work. None of the Dreadfog survivors I have asked so far have enough training in the ways of the Light to assist me, and I am beginning to suspect that the undead murdered all those who did."

Ami hung her head upon receiving the bad news. "I'm sorry to hear that. I'll- I'll have to contact the Avatar and see if he can find some volunteers who would agree to help out here. In the meantime, please keep doing your best, and," her cheeks coloured a little as she remembered her previous behaviour, "don't be afraid to take a break when you need one."

"Ah, in that case, could you transport me to my room, please?" Snyder requested.

"Of course." Ami easily sent him to his destination and stared at the empty air where he had stood. She contemplated the crime Crowned Death and his minions had committed. In retrospect, it was something she should have expected, but it still hit her hard. Naturally, there would have been casualties when the monsters abducted their victims. Nevertheless, she would neither forgive nor forget these evil deeds. Perhaps Keeper Midori had the right idea about how to deal with that cult? Nevertheless, she would have to see to the comfort of the death god's victims first before she decided on an offensive course of action.

"Ouch! Gargh! That bloody bastard!" a loud voice echoed through the underground cave. The pink-haired elf whom it belonged to writhed on his bed like a worm, holding his neck.

Mukrezar's butler stood at his bedside, the very picture of dignity and restraint. "Would Master like a tonic for his sore throat?" he asked, earning himself a glare from his employer.

"Very funny." The ex-Keeper sat up, the springs of the cheap mattress squeaking as he did. "Gah, getting decapitated *hurts*! I hate not disconnecting from a double fast enough to avoid the unpleasantness."

"You are certainly putting a lot of yourself into this project, your Possessiveness," the bearded imp commented, his tone impassive. "Such a pity about that speech you prepared for the loathsome Avatar, though."

"Yes." Mukrezar sighed. "The past years have not been kind to his sense of style. A shame, really."

"It saddens me to see that standards for heroes have fallen so far," the butler agreed, hanging his head. "I will miss their proud and defiant posturing and self-righteous condemnations. But most of all, I will miss seeing their disbelieving, shocked faces when you ambush them during the pre-battle formalities, your Unexpectedness."

"Ah, those were the good times."

"By the way, Master," the imp said, staring at a magic mirror set into the wall, "it appears that Keeper Sinistra is growing annoyed with the unresponsive state of your puppet."

"Hmm?" Mukrezar's eyes dulled for an instant as he reflexively checked on the state of the double in question. "Arggghhhh!" His face contorted into a grimace of pain, and he doubled over, clutching his stomach. After a few seconds of groaning and wheezing, he managed to sit up again by steadying himself against the frame of his bed. Fingers twitching, he glowered at his bug-eyed servant. "I hate you so much."

"Thank you, Master."

Mukrezar sat up, trying to get his breathing under control, and started straightening out his long pink mane. He muttered a few words, and a multi-coloured illusion wavered in front of his face before dispelling. "Ah. I love it when a plan comes together."

"I confess that I still have not idea what it is that you are trying to accomplish, Master. I approve of the agony your plan has caused so far on general principles, but I can't help thinking that it would be more productive if it wasn't all inflicted on yourself."

"That part couldn't be avoided, unfortunately," the elf said sourly, but his smirk returned as quickly as it had disappeared. "Surely, my plan can't be that hard to figure out?"

"The part about you putting your mind into your duplicates is easy enough," the tiny butler stated. "It confuses enemies about your real location, since scrying will reveal the closest one. However, I do not see the *point*. You are not *doing* anything with the distraction."

"Ah, but you have to look at the greater picture. Consider the locations where I had you drop off those cursed rings. What do they all have in common?"

The room went silent as the well-dressed imp thought. "Keepers who would torture and humiliate you in various degrading ways before killing you, rather than killing you outright?"

Mukrezar scowled, and his voice went frosty. "The main qualities I was looking for were greed, caution, and a willingness to seize any opportunity that presents itself, actually. That is, however, not what I was alluding to. Try again."

"Pass. It would take a mind more twisted than mine to unravel your schemes, your Deviousness."

"Well," Mukrezar said, spreading his arms dramatically, "it so happens that all of these locations are within easy travelling distance of the main Silver Hawk branch offices. I figured that I might as well make this enormous bounty on my head work for me. As I was

spotted in the area, all their hunters and mercenaries - in fact, everyone who can tell the pointy end of a spear from its blunt end - would be on my trail." His grin widened. "Out there, hunting my doubles, and not guarding their vaults. Naturally, smart and proactive Keepers like the ones I visited would realise this too and take appropriate action."

The butler let out a whistle. "Oh, of course! Why merely collect a bounty if you can take the part stashed there and then demand the full payment elsewhere? You are counting on the other Keepers' greed to remove the threat of the bounty! I find myself mildly impressed." His expression turned sour. "Alas, it is regrettable that your rivals will be adequately compensated for their efforts."

Mukrezar lay back on his bed and rested his head on his hands. He closed his eyes and started chuckling.

"Master?"

"Oh, I was just considering what would happen if a less-than-loyal minion managed to get into those Keepers' treasure chambers under the guise of returning loot."

"Their vast profit from this operation would be imperceptibly diminished? Gold is *heavy*, Master, in case you have never carried a bag of the stuff around." The butler stared at Mukrezar's prone form through half-lowered eyelids. "There is another layer to your plan, isn't there?"

"A fine question, but there are several better ones that you should be asking yourself instead," Mukrezar said in a smug tone of voice. "Let me give you a few examples." In a reasonable, but exaggeratedly snivelling imitation of his servant's voice, he continued "What is harder to make, a ring that turns its wearer into a copy of my brilliant and dashing Master and lets him take over the body, or a ring that merely lets him take over the body? Could the latter ring lie dormant until the incomparable Mukrezar deems activating it useful? And does he know any magic that consumes a painfully vast amount of gold?"

The butler-imp froze, realising at once what the elf was talking

about, and he started rubbing his hands together in anticipation. "And since you are, effectively, in several places at once-" He was suddenly ripped off his feet and lifted into the air. Dangling upside down, he came face to face with his prone employer.

"-some Keepers who committed ill-advised transgressions against my person are now gnashing their teeth in frustration. And I," Mukrezar's eyes opened abruptly, glowing like red-hot metal from within, "am back in business!"

Last edited: Dec 4, 2016

General Assembly

Originally on 2011-08-03T03:25:00

From her side alcove, Eline watched the slow-moving crowd, her frown turning into a scowl as she spotted a group of people stopping a short distance down the corridor. "Keep the traffic flowing smoothly, I'll be right back," she instructed the two goblins behind her.

"Right!" "Sure thing!" the underlings confirmed.

The dark elf's pointy ears picked up two metallic ringing noises as the goblins' fingers struck their helmets in a sloppy salute, but she didn't look back. She was too busy pushing her way through the densely-packed humans, a scowl on her face as she moved against the flow. Her fierce expression was doing at least as much to clear a way for her as the threat of the sheathed sword at her belt. She squeezed past the protruding belly of a stubble-faced man, the coarse brown fabric of his tattered tunic feeling rough and scratchy against the bare skin on her forearm. His breath reeked of old fish, and with a shudder of disgust, she shoved him aside harder than was strictly necessary. Ignoring his cry of protest, she continued onwards until she broke through the wall of gawkers and saw the source of the disturbance.

"-get moving! You be questioning my orders? Are you?"

A goblin was standing in front of a shivering boy who reached barely up to Eline's waist.

"Move! Me no tell you again!"

The frightened child mutely backed away further into the side alcove, the tear tracks on his cheeks glistening in the electrical light.

"You obey now, or me punish!" the greenskin threatened, putting his hand on the club dangling from his belt.

Eline grit her teeth as the child predictably retreated even further away from its tormentor. Stupid goblins. The foolish minion seemed entirely unaware of the hostile glares the villagers and townsfolk were shooting at him. People were stopping to watch the scene and grumbled angrily, and the dark elf noticed many clenched fists. Her hackles rose. This situation could turn violent any moment now. Since she had the same Mercury symbol as the goblin pinned to her shirt, she would certainly be turned into an outlet for their anger too. She didn't think her sword would make much of a difference against an angry mob.

The slender elf darted forward until she was right behind the moronic greenskin. A swift leg sweep from behind sent the goblin sprawling.

He let out a startled yelp as he crashed to the ground. Twisting like a cat, he looked up at his attacker. "Who-" His angry snarl died on his lips as he saw his immediate superior loom over him.

"Lugi, you idiot! What do you think you are doing?"

"My job?" the confused goblin muttered, pointing at the wide-eyed child. "That ran away! Me give chase!"

In her mind, Eline groaned. She could vividly imagine an unattended boy spotting the little monster and backing away in fright. "Do you think that terrifying a small child and causing a congestion in traffic," Eline swept her left arm around, indicating the onlookers, "will keep everyone moving to the congress hall smoothly?"

Using his elbows, Lugi crawled away from the shouting dark elf. "Me only doing my job!" he repeated obstinately.

Eline suddenly felt something warm press against the back of her left leg and looked down. Her fingers twitched when she spotted the child hiding behind her, peeking around her thigh. Wonderful. This was going to do wonders for her tough image. Eyes glittering angrily, she snarled at the goblin on the ground "Shut up and get to the main hall before I report you to our Empress!"

"Did nothing wrong," the goblin protested as he scrambled to his

feet. "Getting everyone to big cave, just like she said!"

Her arms akimbo, Eline bowed down until her face was level with the underling's. "She also said not to frighten the people here. Now look at that boy! Does he look non-frightened to you?"

Lugi took in the pale, tear-smeared face of the child. Slowly, his skin lost colour until it was a sickly yellow-green.

"Do you know what our Empress does to those who don't follow her orders?" the dark elf continued, grinning like a shark.

The goblin's ears drooped. "No?"

"Do you want to find out?"

"Ye- wait, no!" understanding the threat a second late, Lugi shook his head rapidly and backed away.

"One more step out of line, and you will! Now scram!" Eline let out a relieved breath when the creature finally fled. *Most disciplined of the bunch my arse!* she thought sourly. *Is this what Commander Cathy has to put up with every day?* She should have known that this promotion to officer of the newly-created town guard had sounded too good to be true. Now she had to deal with goblins, just because the Empress thought the tiny things wouldn't intimidate the prisoners so much. Speaking of which... "Nothing more to see here," she called out. "Stop loitering and keep moving!"

Fortunately, most of the onlookers seemed satisfied with the way she had handled the goblin, and left without raising a fuss. However, two muscular youths lingered, glaring at Eline.

She met their eyes with her ruby red ones and smirked, as if daring them to attack. After a moment, the large farm boys deflated under her challenging stare and slunk back into the crowd. Good. Putting them in their places like that felt great. She could get used to this job, she supposed, even despite the goblins. Darkness knew she had lived through much worse indignities under Morrigan, and contrary to the rumours, Empress Mercury didn't seem to share his tastes. Hmm, wasn't she forgetting something? "You can let go

now," she said to the child, whose arms were still encircling her leg.

The brat shook his head and pressed his face against her leg.

Eline sighed and experimentally tried to dislodge him. She quickly aborted the attempt when her trousers started sliding down along with the clingy boy. Was he part barnacle? "Let go, kid! Find someone else to bother!"

"Got yourself in a bit of a bind there, Eline?" a breathy voice asked from behind.

Just great, now the teasing would never stop. "Venna." Eline looked over her shoulder at the busty woman who had just appeared from the crowd, flanked by her own goblin guards. "Shouldn't you be keeping order near the dormitories?"

"No need, they are empty now. These are the last villagers," the other elf said, indicating the uncertain-looking people behind her. She bent down, and the boy clinging to Eline's leg let out a startled shriek and suddenly let go. "My, aren't you the ticklish one?" the pale-skinned elf said as she grabbed him under the shoulders and raised him into the air. Unceremoniously, she handed the struggling child to a middle-aged woman passing by. "Here, keep him out of trouble."

"But-"

"That's an order, don't argue," Venna said, unperturbed by the protest, and turned away. "Now, since we seem to be done here, why don't we go to the big hall too?" She indicated the retreating back of the last villagers to pass through the corridor.

Eline's gaze briefly lingered on the child, who was looking back at her while the stranger led him away by his hand. "Might as well," she agreed.

The two dark elves were walking in companionable silence when one of the men in the crowd slowed and let himself fall behind until he was next to them.

His body language reminded Eline of one of the shy and insecure

young warlocks who had tried to ask her out. While his eyes lingered briefly on the hem of Venna's short purple dress, she doubted that he had any romantic intentions.

"Another one," Venna whispered. "Why do they all come to me to ask their question?"

With a crooked grin, Eline shot a significant look at the other dark elf's chest. "Must be that badge."

"Ahem, excuse me, ladies" the man said with a stiff bow, causing the goblins to cackle. He looked at them uncertainly.

From the bright colours of his tattered outfit, Eline concluded that he had been some kind of minor noble before being dragged off by the undead.

"What is it?" Venna asked, waving her hand with the palm facing downwards to shush the goblins.

"My name's Zolvan, and I used to live in the town of Fourclovers, which you probably haven't heard about..." He waited for a moment, and when neither of the elves gave any indication to the contrary, he continued "Ah, well, you see, since I used to be a magistrate, and we didn't find anyone else who held a higher position, and you two seem to be the only intelligent, um, servants of Her Dark Majesty who aren't busy with something else, and assigned to looking after us anyway, and-"

"Will you get to the point already?" Venna interrupted the sweating man.

"Err, yes, of course. You wouldn't happen to know what Empress Mercury has planned for us?"

"Nope. How would I?" Venna countered, sounding weary and resigned.

Eline got the feeling that her friend had been hearing similar questions quite a lot today.

"A guess?" he continued, clearly dissatisfied with her answer.

"Certainly, you must have been wondering too-"

"I told you, I don't know anything!"

"Not even a hint? Then what am I supposed to tell my people when-"

Eline tuned the conversation out and took a few steps forward. She put her hands on the shoulders of two villagers who had stopped in the entrance to the congress hall, gaping wide-eyed into the vast expanse. "Keep moving, please! You can get an even better look at it from the inside while you find a seat," she said, not unfriendly. She could well understand why the town bumpkins would freeze and gawk. While the vast, domed cave wasn't as big as a few in the Underworld that she had seen, it came close. None of them had been as well-lit, though, and she wondered how these incredibly bright lamps affixed to the steel arches worked. Unlike the first time she had seen the place, the rows upon rows of ascending seats were now filled with thousands of people, giving her a proper sense of scale. She couldn't even make out the faces of those sitting furthest from the entrance.

A goblin guard arrived from the downwards-leading stairs and waved at the new arrivals. "This way. Still some free seats near front!"

His arrival shook Eline from her thoughts, and she realised that she had been admiring the scenery just as the townsfolk had. As they followed the guide downwards, she returned her attention to Venna, just in time to see her uncross her arms and raise her voice at Zolvan.

"Fine! If you want to know that badly, ask her yourself! She's right over there!" Venna snapped, pointing her index finger downwards and to the left, to the centre of the stage below. There, a blue-haired figure sat upon a throne of white marble, looking too slight for the massive seat.

Ami patiently waited for the last stragglers who had entered the hall to find free seats. Unsurprisingly, the spots furthest away from her

had been occupied first, and now the few villagers forced to be seated in the front row stared at her fearfully. Not that they were the only ones. Ami let her gaze wander over the rows upon rows of seats, arranged in a way similar to modern concert halls or cinemas. She had consciously avoided creating an amphitheatre-like structure, since she was under enough pressure already without flashbacks to her duel with the reaper. Thankfully she was already sitting down, so the weak feeling in her knees did not affect her much. That, at least, was a practical advantage of the throne her advisers had insisted on. Nevertheless, she could feel sweet form on the palms of her hands as she struggled against her shyness. Jadeite's glamour that gave her ice golem body a living appearance was very realistic like that.

"Jadeite," she called in a hushed voice. It still sounded loud in this room filled with people who were, except for the younger children, unnaturally silent. "Is the sound system ready?"

The dark general approached with swift but dignified steps. "Yes, your Majesty. Allow me." He bowed down and handed her a microphone. While turned away from the crowd, he whispered "Don't worry too much. They are not going to rate your performance."

Ami blinked and answered with a brief smile, encouraged by his words. He was right, she thought while he moved back to his spot to the right of her throne. Nobody was going to laugh at her, even if she should stammer and stutter her way through her announcements. Emboldened for the moment, she moved one finger across the microphone, causing the glamoured-up speakers distributed around the room to hiss softly.

The mass of humans before her started shifting, startled by the sound, and Ami saw heads turn as their owners searched for the source of the noise.

"Greetings, everyone," Ami said, wincing for a moment as the startled listeners ducked in fright. "Don't be afraid, I mean no harm." Not that they would believe her without a lot of convincing. "Please don't be startled when the wall behind me lights up, it is just a picture taken by a crystal ball and projected to the wall. It should appear right about... *now*."

Behind her and above the throne, a giant-sized image of her face appeared, large enough to be clearly visible even from the farthest rows. Despite the warning, a wave of mutters and gasps went through the room.

"All right," Ami said, speaking easier now that all those gazes were focused on the screen above her, rather than herself, "I'm sure you are all wondering what is going on and why you are here. It's so I can address a number of questions you may have, and for administrative purposes. I'm not much of a public speaker, so I will try to keep my explanations short and succinct."

Seeing that she had at least the interest of the adults now, she continued "First, yes, I am Sailor Mercury, also known as Empress Mercury of the Avatar Islands," several children started crying here, but Ami steeled herself and pressed onwards, "and no, you don't need to be afraid of me. I bear no ill intent towards any of you. Please consider yourself guests, rather than prisoners."

She could tell by the sceptical and dubious expressions that the townsfolk weren't believing her. That wasn't unexpected, and Ami hoped that clarifying her future plans would at least calm the audience down. "You are currently on the Avatar Islands proper, and I apologise for the poor accommodations. I did not foresee having to save you from Crowned Death's minions and bringing you here."

"If we are *guests*, then can we go home?" a particularly brave man in the tenth row shouted loudly. He was wearing tattered militia garb, and the people sitting around him paled and leaned away from him.

Ami blinked, and the giant image of her on the screen mirrored her surprise. "In principle, the answer to that question is yes-"

Excited and sceptical whispers filled the room.

"-but there is a complication that you need to be made aware of."

"Yeah, right," the man snorted and muttered so quietly that she would not have noticed if she hadn't been focusing on with her Keeper perception.

"It relates to your eye injuries." Ami noticed that she was nervously wringing her hands, and forced herself to put them back on the armrests of her throne. "While my assistant Jadeite here has healed those wounds, the cure is, unfortunately, not permanent."

This time, Ami had to stop because her public reacted poorly to the announcement. The hall erupted into pandemonium. A cacophony of frightened shrieks, groans, and shouts echoed through the giant cave as scared people jumped to their feet and demanded answers. "Not permanent?" "I don't wanna be blind again!" "Nooo!" "What do you mean?"

"Please calm down! CALM DOWN!" Ami was forced to raise her voice to make herself heard, even with the sound system amplifying her words. Fortunately, being shouted at by an irritated Keeper seemed to be as much of a shock to flaring emotions as a bucket of ice cold water would have been. She continued more calmly "Please! There is no need to get worried, you are not going to suddenly go blind again!" Ami fought the urge to hang her head as she saw the now thoroughly frightened people huddle in their seats. This was all so frustrating! Why couldn't they realise that she only wanted to help them?

She took a calming breath, and a somewhat strained smile returned to her face. "I repeat, there is no risk of something happening to your eyes without warning. The limit of the cure is not time, but distance, since it is powered by a local source. As long as you stay within this complex or the surrounding area, you have nothing to fear."

"So it's a leash," the militiaman who had spoken up before spat, a dark look on his face. Around him, the spreading murmurs agreed with the sentiment.

"No, it's not like that!" Ami protested. "It's a stopgap measure until I find a better way to deal with cursed wounds. Even in the worst case scenario, your eyes should be fine on their own in a year or two!" *They don't look too happy about the news,* she thought after observing the effects of her words. "I assure you that I am going to improve your accommodations as soon as possible. I am also willing to arrange transport for those who still want to leave but- please let

me finish!" She raised her hands defensively, as if to stem the overwhelmingly loud tide of demands to be returned home. "I want you to know the risks of this decision first. The wounds to your eyes are cursed, and it's likely that you will be blind for months or years before someone able to heal them can take care of you. Please think about it for a while before you make your choice. Right now, I need to address a more pressing issue. The children."

Those boys and girls old enough to understand what was going on tried to look very small, and Ami saw a few of them hide behind the people next to them. Some of the adults were reacting too, pulling a child or two into a protective hug.

The room went dead silent, and Ami put her hands together nervously as she faced those hostile gazes. "Most of the people here are children," she clarified, "and many of them are lost and on their own. In a first step, I want to reunite them with their families, or at least with people they know."

Some postures relaxed, but not all of them. One woman in the back shouted "Why? So you know who to use as hostage?"

Ami shot her a glare, which she immediately regretted when the giant screen above her magnified the expression, glowering down on the assembly like an angry giant with crimson-glowing eyes.

The effect on the room was instantaneous. Some of the children she wanted to help started crying, and the adults shivered in their seats.

The young empress closed her eyes until she was sure she could keep her features neutral again. "Please do not insinuate things like that, it really offends me," she stated quietly. "Now, here is how this will work: any children who are not currently with a family member will come down here and walk across the stage." She smiled encouragingly. "When they do, they'll appear here on the big screen, just as I currently do. If any of you recognise a child, please come down and take him or her into your care." She gave a hand signal to the group of five dark elves waiting at the entrance of the hall. "Children, if you have nobody to take care of you, follow the town guards who are going to pass through the rows, please."

"Now, I have some more announcements to make while this is happening. First, I want those of you who had leadership positions before you were abducted to act as liaisons between me and your people. Please stay behind once this meeting is over. Second, I need volunteers who are able to read and write. Their task will be recording the personal information of everyone who is here, so that the complete lists can be mailed to their home countries. In a second phase, these administrators will assist with composing and collecting letters to loved ones and next of kin. All such volunteers should move to the right side of the stage."

Ami saw some men and women get up hesitantly before more followed their example. More important was the reaction of the crowd, which sounded somewhat hopeful and excited for the first time. Ami felt her spirits lift as she watched the animated expressions. "The next issue I need to address is food. I am aware of the complaints about the current fish-with-chicken diet, and can sympathise. I do have farms with ripe wheat, fruit and vegetables to remedy this problem, but not enough manpower to harvest and process them. I-

"Momma!"

Ami paused as a young girl jumped off the stage and threw herself into the arms of a haggard woman with dark rings under her eyes, which were tearing up with joy. The teenager watched the reunion for a moment with a wide smile on her face, deeply touched by the sight, and also a little envious. When she continued her speech, her mood remained lighter than before. "I encourage all skilled farmers, cooks, and bakers to help out with the harvest so that everyone can have proper food again soon. Please come down to the left side of the stage if you volunteer!"

This time, people stood up more quickly, and the prospect of better meals even earned her a few cheers.

"Finally, I am planning to improve your accommodations, and the aid of skilled architects to help with the planning and design would be appreciated. Please stay behind with the liaisons so you can gather their ideas, too," Ami finished the last point on her list. She felt that she had made real progress here and managed to convince her

guests that she wasn't going to simply kill them all. Things were looking up. *But not for everyone,* she was forced to acknowledge when she spotted the two first children who had crossed the entire stage without being collected. She hoped with all her heart that not many would join them.

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A Promotion

Originally on 2011-08-13T23:12:00

Ami slowly walked around the dungeon heart in the fortified centre of her underground complex, her eyes covered by her visor. She cautiously stepped around an invisible obstacle on the ground, her frown deepening as she typed away on her computer. "Snyder, here is another leak. I'll need another set of clean-up wards," she said in the pause between two rumbling heartbeats.

"Understood, I shall prepare them at once," the acolyte replied. He threw an uneasy look at the brightening and dimming orb before he pulled several thin sheets of obsidian and a silver chisel from his satchel.

"This hole isn't as big as the other one," Ami declared after staring silently at the data scrolling over her screen for a few seconds. "It's not hard to fix."

"I am glad that the deterioration is limited to that very-rarely used part of the heart." The acolyte started chiselling arcane symbols into his stone plates. "Nevertheless, it is fortunate that you detected it in time. I am afraid that your uniform would not flatter my physique at all. I simply do not have the legs to pull off that look."

Ami giggled at the thought of the pudgy redhead in a miniskirt and nodded. "Yes, I see what you mean." Her face fell as she was reminded of what had caused the damage in the first place. Even diluted, the caustic energies she had sucked out of Crowned Death's pet monster had not been kind to the circuits intended to shunt waste magic into the dark gods' realm. "It's a good thing that I only used my transformation twice since the battle at the island," she said as she made a floating brush trace an irregular outline on the floor. "Otherwise, the spill could have become much larger."

"Ah yes. I imagine inundating the room with chaotic mana would have played havoc with your traps." Snyder peered down at the floor from the balcony that Ami had erected for his benefit, as if he was

able to somehow detect the lethal devices hidden underneath the innocent-looking floor tiles if he only searched long enough.

Ami finished drawing and looked up at Snyder. "I marked the last of the contaminated zones. Just throw one of the absorption wards in when you are ready, please. Two for the larger ones. I have to go check on my other dungeon hearts. I aimed the energy at this one, but better safe than sorry."

"That won't be a problem at all," the acolyte said, bringing down his tiny hammer with cautious, precise blows as he carved out a particularly branching rune. "See you later." He didn't even look up when a bluish flash lit up the room, visible even during the dungeon heart's bright phase.

Hieron of the Plains could think of better things to do with his time than troubling a young girl who hadn't done anything wrong aside from being outsmarted by a great evil. Not that the latter should be taken lightly, since it could lead to disaster, but still.

The blonde girl standing in the centre of the crystalline floor had dark rings under her eyes, and the wings protruding from the circular hole in her turtleneck shirt hung down limply. She kept her gaze low and avoided meeting the eyes of any of the seven Oracles sitting in a semi-circle before her. It was a shame, really, since he found her golden eyes quite enchanting.

The countless chimes and bells hanging like loose curtains from the circular roof of the open pavilion chimed gently in the warm breeze, hiding the creaking of his joints as he shifted his weight. Not for the first time, he wished that being an Oracle of the Empire would not involve long periods of sitting still in a cross-legged position. Perhaps he should start considering retirement? Ah well, it looked as if his colleagues, four of which were only present as colourless, ghostly outlines, had finally come to a decision. He had given his opinion hours ago.

"Camilla, formerly of the Full-Fairy Aerial Reconnaissance Force," the central and highest-ranking of the figures began.

Hieron almost snorted at Jogar of the Forest's pompous tone. His fellow Oracle had always had an overinflated opinion of his own importance, even before his green robes had gained the golden leaf pattern denoting his rank as High Seer. That pointy-chinned old drama queen probably had intentionally delayed delivering the verdict until now, just so the setting sun would frame him when he did. Backlit by the orange disc and framed by marble pillars, he must have been an impressive sight to the young fairy. Waste of effort, really, since the poor thing looked intimidated enough already after her hour-long examination.

Camilla winced at the reminder of her lost status and raised her head to squint at the green-robed Oracle.

"Concerning the suspicions of treason, this council has found, after thorough examination of the facts, assisted by divination and interrogation of the witnesses, that you are not guilty. Your transgression was rooted in ignorance, rather than voluntary misconduct. Remember that, as former minion of a Keeper, you are banned from all military, administrative, and magical professions."

The girl's shoulders slumped. "I understand, revered High Seer," she said in a quiet voice.

Hieron didn't particularly like doing this to the girl. It didn't seem fair, especially since the fiend who had tricked her was smart enough to force even the Light gods to the negotiation table. Which, unfortunately, made such caution all the more vital when dealing with her. "However," he spoke up, interrupting his colleague's undoubtedly well-rehearsed speech, "there is an additional option in your case." He gave Jogar a meaningful look and received a mildly annoyed one in return.

Camilla tilted her head to the side, a glimmer of curiosity lightening up her gloomy expression.

"Ah, yes, that highly irregular suggestion brought up by the Keeper Empress herself," the High Seer said, pinching the tip of his pointy white beard between his fingers. "Very irregular indeed."

"It went through the Augur Council already?" the blonde blurted out,

her eyebrows creeping upwards in surprise.

Hieron would have been baffled in her place too if he hadn't already been informed. If there was something the Augurs were famous for, then it was the glacial pace at which they reached consensus.

"Since the suggestion is illegal by our laws, only the Emperor could have authorised it in spite of that," the blue-robed Oracle sitting to the left of the High Seer said. "Thus, the Council unanimously voted to leave the decision up to him."

Every possible decision had potentially career-ending risks, so they reacted as if they had been handed a live scorpion, Hieron translated in his mind. He wouldn't have hesitated phrasing it like that either, but Kanif of the Southern Seas was still young enough to put great stock in etiquette and dignity. And he probably wasn't playing with the idea of retirement yet, either.

"...Hieron. Hieron!"

The orange-robed Oracle started from his thoughts to find the other six dignitaries look at him disapprovingly.

"If you are quite done chuckling into your beard," Jogar said, sounding as pompous as ever, "then produce the document already!"

"Yeah, yeah. Don't rush me, I'm an old man." Hieron's wrinkled hand seized a wooden scroll case from the ornate chest behind him. It was an opportunity to exercise his legs after sitting for so long, and he wouldn't let it be cut short by his superior getting a little impatient. Taking things further, he - slowly - got up and walked over to the young girl to hand her the Emperor's letter. His colleagues frowned upon this breach of protocol, quite literally in some cases, but he didn't care. They didn't have to deal with his old bones. "There you go," he said warmly to the former soldier, who was staring up at him with wide eyes. She kept blinking as he shuffled back to his mat.

"As I was saying," Jogar didn't even try to mask his irritation now, "the Emperor has tentatively agreed to making you the ambassador to the Avatar Islands, no doubt because you will be less of a security

risk there than here."

Hieron frowned. Sure, they had all been thinking that, but to actually say it out loud...

Camilla's face reddened, but she kept quiet. She did look a bit more hopeful than before, though.

"However," the green-robed Oracle continued, "the Emperor, in his infinite wisdom, has listed a number of conditions that must be fulfilled in order to show that the Dark Empress is acting in good faith. I suggest you have a look at your document."

Intrigued, Camilla opened the container and unrolled the scroll. As she read, her face turned paler and paler. "She- she's not going to like that," the fairy stammered after a while. "Do you really think she will agree to this?"

"There is the possibility that she will be reacting violently, yes," one of the Oracles not here in person said.

"Which is why you may decide by yourself whether to take the post or not. It is your choice alone," Hieron said, figuring that the girl was stressed enough already.

"However, your presence there would be an asset to the Empire, since it would allow us to keep a closer eye on the Dark Empress' abilities and give us a base for covert operations," Kanif stated neutrally, folding his arms.

"In addition, the conditions imposed should hamper her for a while," another of the ghostly Oracles said.

Hieron had a bit of trouble telling them apart without being able to see the colour of their robes.

"Finally, this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," Jogar added in a disdainful voice, "considering your recent history." Subtle as always.

Camilla didn't have to think for long. "I'll do it! For the Shining Concord!" she said, standing ramrod straight. Only the tiniest quiver in her voice betraying her doubt. She almost completed a salute

before she remembered that she was no longer in the military, and lowered the raised arm sheepishly.

"It is good to see that you maintain a sense of duty," Jogar said. "Now, here are your instructions. A room has been prepared for you at the Spinning Mirrors Inn. You will find your uniform, rank insignia, and other useful equipment there. Have a good night's rest, but do not leave the room after sunrise. The wizards on our ship closest to Empress Mercury's dungeon will cast a calling circle to your chamber in the morning. You will enter it and continue to your destination on a flying carpet. There, you willdeliver the Emperor's message. Did you get all that?"

The blonde fae nodded.

"Good. Then I congratulate you on your new position, Ambassador." The High Seer inclined his head slightly, keeping his expression carefully neutral. "I hereby officially conclude this session. You may leave whenever you wish."

The ghostly Oracles were the first to disappear, simply fading away from their spots after bowing to each other.

Camilla followed their lead, formally taking her leave from the three remaining Oracles.

Hieron kept watching her as she spread her wings and took to the air, passing over the flower beds arranged in the shape of a wreath of laurels encircling three crossed swords. She seemed to pay no attention to the blooming gardens, instead heading straight for the marble spires in the distance, whose lit windows shone like tiny stars in the twilight. "Well, she's a brave little girl. I hope she survives," he said.

"Not that little," Kanif objected with a small leer.

"From my perspective, all of you look like children," the orange-robed Oracle said. With a relieved sigh, he stood up and started walking up and down to get the blood flowing properly again.

"Are you quite done complaining about your age? We have some

details to iron out," Jogar said. He was the only one of the three who remained stubbornly seated in his cross-legged position.

"What about her sisters?" Hieron asked. "Being a Rainbow, they will be miserable with one of them missing." The old man wriggled his toes, letting out a sound between a sigh and a groan.

"We could assign them to the young ambassador as guards," Jogar suggested after briefly thinking the matter over. "If this undertaking doesn't immediately end in bloodshed, we will need additional staff for the embassy anyway."

"That might be condemning them to death, though, given the nature of the host nation," Kanif cautioned.

"They have come out of their multiple encounters with the Dark Empress unharmed so far," Jogar countered. "She might have taken a liking to them. Which is also grounds for at least some suspicion. In any case, they are the most likely to survive the experience."

"They were captured before. If we sent them, we would not be feeding her someone with new secrets to extract," the blue-robed Oracle pondered. "We will give them the choice, just like her sister," she declared.

"Pfff. That's not a real choice at all," Hieron complained. "As if they would abandon each other."

"Nevertheless, it is the least distasteful of our options in this situation. This discussion is closed."

Ami's visit to her dungeon heart hidden in the Arctic ice remained short. Not enough of Crowned Death's power had ended up here to seriously erode its inner warding. She used up a few of the gold coins kept in reserve here to patch up the minor blemishes she could spot. The damage would have fixed itself in time, but why put it off if she was here already? Secrecy was the main protection of this dungeon heart, and she didn't want it compromised by strange magical phenomenons. She'd definitely have to add additional

precautions once she had some spare time. For the moment though, it seemed safe enough, being located far from any inhabitation or distinguishing geographical features. With a whirl of snowflakes, Ami teleported to her third dungeon.

When she spotted her advanced-model dungeon heart, she gasped at the drastic changes in its appearance and covered her mouth with her hands. The vines around the artefact's pillars had withered away, leaving bony structures that resembled the human spine in its place, and its vibrant crimson colour had darkened to the reddish black of coagulated blood.

Immediately, Ami summoned the Mercury computer and started analysing the data she received from her visor. She started with the pile of bluish-purple stone skulls that the pulsing orb was resting on, and worked her way up to the beating heart itself. There, her search algorithms outlined a hole in the containment wards in red. She quickly repeated her scan of the surrounding area, but could find no trace of chaotic energy. Perhaps it had discharged itself on the dungeon heart and caused the changes in appearance? This model deliberately left the interior of the dungeon more malleable to corruption effects, after all. It could very well be what had happened, but it did not explain the alarming death theme. Unable to solve the mystery even after thoroughly scanning the structure for a third time, she focused on patching up the hole instead.

"A death theme, you say? I find this disturbing." Snyder removed his dust-covered gloves and narrowed his eyes at Mercury. The blue-haired girl was inspecting the warding tablets lying inside the contours she had drawn on the ground earlier.

"So do I," Ami agreed. "It does not make much sense either, since any chaotic magic escaping from my transformation sequence should have completely random effects." She briefly thought back to what had happened to Boris, Tserk, and the chickens, and looked queasy. "If they are following a theme, then perhaps the corruption effects themselves have changed? They are derived from the dark gods' realm, after all." She looked up suddenly, her eyes wide "Do you think Crowned Death might be lurking nearby, metaphysically

speaking?"

The acolyte blinked once. "While I am fairly well informed on the divine, the effects of the dark gods on dungeon hearts are slightly outside of my area of expertise. It is not impossible, but I do imagine the dark one would wish to spend his time more productively."

"I suppose you are right." Ami scratched her chin. There had to be something she was missing. "What about one of his creatures, though? Could the power of the Minor Aspect have coalesced back into a living being?" Even dissolved to a tenth of its original potency, the dark energy she had sucked from the monster had still tried to stick together.

"Ah, Mercury, I think you are missing the obvious here. You report not finding any residue of the Aspect's energy anywhere, but you have not checked all the vital components of your dungeon heart system yet."

"Um?" Ami thought for a moment, then pointed a thumb at herself. "You mean me? But I'm feeling fine! Believe me, when that dark power was passing through me, I felt every moment of it!" The idea that something that had burned so much could yet remain undetected within her body seemed absurd.

Snyder kept looking at her expectantly. "You personally handled more of that dread power than any single of your dungeon hearts, and they are more sturdy than you are, yet you expect to have remained unaffected?"

Well, when he puts it that way... "I suppose being thorough won't hurt." Ami concentrated on locating Cathy and found her walking through the empty barracks, scrutinising the state of the swords and maces stashed in the weapon racks. Ami used her Keeper powers to knock against the door a few times to avoid startling the swordswoman, and then transported her, herself, and Snyder to the infirmary. "Cathy, I need your assistance briefly. Do you remember how to activate the visor?"

The ersatz-senshi tapper her right earlobe, making the transparent device slide over her eyes. "Sure thing. What do you need?"

"Just keep looking at me," Ami said, bringing out her palmtop computer. She pushed a few buttons. "Okay, I'm getting the data feed from your visor now instead of mine. Let me make a few adjustments..."

Cathy raised an eyebrow as letters, symbols, and diagrams appeared in her field of vision, but gave no indication that she understood anything that she was seeing.

Ami, on the other hand, could make sense of the annotations surrounding the outline of her body. As she had expected, there was no sign of- wait, what was that? Her fingers danced over the keyboard, bringing the various energy channels running through her body into clearer focus. She made those relevant only to her senshi powers and the dungeon heart fade into the background and lit up the vein-like network conducting Dark Kingdom energy. Had she imagined the anomaly? No, there it was again, a brief fluctuation in intensity that shouldn't have been there. She zoomed in closer. That tiny speck of darkness, cloaked with a mantle of Metallia's power, unmistakably exuded the taint of the death god. "You were right," she muttered, stunned.

"How bad is it?" the acolyte asked, stepping closer to the paling girl who kept staring unblinkingly at the display.

"Is something wrong?" Cathy asked. The various red dots slowly appearing within the silhouette of Mercury's body couldn't mean anything good.

Ami's typing reached a frantic speed. "It's different from before," she said, scared by what she was seeing. "It's almost like a slow-acting poison now." She ran more projections. "I didn't notice because my sailor senshi enchantments are compensating for the damage it has caused so far. Eh?" The blue-haired girl looked up in surprise as her data source went out of focus.

Cathy rushed to Ami's side and put her hand on the younger girl's shoulders. "Poison? How bad is it? Snyder, get over here and do something!"

Ami blinked and focused on bringing her breathing back under

control. "Calm down," she told the blonde. "It's not as bad as it sounds!" Having to explain the situation helped her put things into perspective. "The foreign energy within my body is very weak, but it's dangerous because it's insidious. Snyder should have no trouble neutralising it. It seems to work a bit like an infection, slowly converting some of my own powers into more of itself. Left unchecked, the process would eventually have accelerated at an exponential rate. By the time I would have noticed the effects without my scanner, it would have been too late." She wrapped her arms around herself and shuddered.

"In that case, we should not lose any time and remove the problem before it can get worse," Snyder said as he came closer. "What do I have to do?"

"Simply inundating my body with the power of the Light should disrupt any dark energy in there," Ami said. "Crowned Death's power will be gone for good, since it can't replenish itself from an outside source. My own will be almost unaffected."

"I see." Snyder nodded once and brought his right arm up, palm facing outward, and reached out to touch the teenager's shoulder.

"Eeep!" Ami jerked away from the white-glowing hand, jumping halfway across the room in reaction to the wave of revulsion that shot through her body.

Snyder blinked, as did Cathy.

"I'm fine," Ami said, wringing her hands in embarrassment. "It's just that the feel of that Light energy makes me shy away." She took a deep breath and walked back to her initial position, right in front of the acolyte. "I'm prepared for it now."

"Eeek!" Ami squealed again as soon as the glow touched her. She just couldn't help herself. Belatedly, she noticed that she had leapt away again.

"Did I hurt you?" Snyder asked, sounding worried.

Ami shook her head. "No, it doesn't hurt, it's just a very unpleasant

sensation. Imagine being touched with the coldest hands you can imagine, or a light electric jolt, or a tickling sensation that doesn't feel good in the least. It's not that bad on a conscious level, but my body simply tries to get away."

"Ah." Snyder scratched his head. "All right, how do we proceed?"

The door to the infirmary flew open. "What's with all this racket? Some people are trying to sleep here!" Tiger poked her head in, her expression halfway between worry and irritation. She listened with crossed arms as she was informed about what was going on. "Is that all?" A mischievous grin appeared on her face. "You only need someone to hold you down, then! I'll go and get Jadeite-"

"NO!" Ami was blushing heavily. "Not him!"

"And here I thought you'd rather enjoy that," the striped youma said, prompting the teenager to hide her tomato-red cheeks within her hands.

"I can do it," Cathy suggested.

"No, I need you to keep scanning me to make sure everything harmful is really gone," Ami objected, peeking through her fingers.

"Oh, I know just the right person for the job! I'll be right back!" Tiger announced and started cackling.

"Wait!" Ami shouted, but it was too late. Only a shattering pillar of stone remained where Tiger had teleported out.

Nef the goblin was calmly scrubbing the floor with his mob when a large, irregular shadow fell over him. He whirled around and now faced a huge, writhing blob of black and green tentacles.

"Hurry! Hurry up already! This is going to be so much fun!" a female voice came from the forest of pseudopodia.

Nef wondered since when tentacle monsters could talk out loud. This distracted him so much that he almost forgot to throw himself

out of the path of the beast's slurping advance. Fortunately, instinct moved his body even without his conscious effort. Standing with his back pressed against the wall and with his feet in a puddle of dirt water, courtesy of his overturned bucket, he watched the beast slither past. In its wake followed a muscular creature, who had to be the one who had talked earlier.

The strange humanoid with short bluish hair and faded black stripes showed a surprising resemblance to the Keeper, although she was taller than the latter. She kept cackling all the way as she chased the Empress' pet into the infirmary.

Nef looked at the ground to locate his dropped mop and growled as he spotted the mess. Nobody respected his work! He wouldn't let himself be treated like that just because he was a goblin any more! He'd tell that thoughtless creature off for ruining all his hard work, yes, he would! After stomping about half the way to the infirmary door, he heard a loud yelp and hesitated. Well, nothing too unusual. This was an infirmary after all, some pain was to be expected.

Another piercing scream echoed through the corridor, followed by a squeal and a strangled gasp.

In the brief silence, Nef thought he heard the creature from before chuckling loudly. Then, the girlish screams continued. Very slowly and quietly, the goblin turned around and tiptoed away. Perhaps confronting that thing wasn't a good idea, after all. None of the other creatures who were poking their head curiously out of doorways seemed inclined to go investigate either, so he didn't feel like a complete coward.

"Somehow, despite all the incompatibilities and rather wimpy magical potency, this dungeon heart type has a certain charm," Mukrezar said as he looked down at the pulsing membrane in the circular pit below him. He turned away from the artefact and started moving his index finger in the shape of a sideways figure eight. The digit left a green-glowing trail of dispersing motes of mana in the air.

The room before him was empty except for a corral in which four

imps were looking fearfully up at the ceiling. Their fear proved justified when heavy bags filled with jingling gold coins formed from thin air and started dropping like deadly raindrops. In their panic, two of the tiny minions ran into each other and fell to the ground, only to be crushed into a bloody paste by the bag that dropped on top of them. Even as their remains dissolved back into mana, the nearby dungeon heart spat out two new imps to take their place.

Mukrezar laughed.

"It is *such* a surprise that you would enjoy a dungeon heart that can compensate for myopic planning, Master," the butler imp said, sounding unimpressed. He calmy took a single step aside and didn't even look up when a bag crashed down on the spot where he had just stood, splitting open and spilling coins over the floor.

"Bah, out of mana again already." Mukrezar stopped casting the spell and stared through half-lidded eyes at the six bags of gold he had created. "I still prefer the firepower provided by the original type." The elf gestured, and the precious metal turned into a ghostly mist that streamed into the dungeon heart.

Before him, two glittering figurines rose from the floor. Built from precious gems, they represented him standing on the back of the pained-looking Avatar, striking a victorious pose.

Mukrezar picked the statuettes up and climbed the stairs leading over the dungeon heart's boundary wall. Without hesitation, he stepped into the emptiness, but instead of dropping into the pit, he remained afloat in the verdant whirlwind swirling above it. "Then again, nobody ever said-" he began as he turned into a black streak that shot downwards.

He reappeared out of a glowing sphere resting on the bent backs of three golden troll statues, solidified, and floated to the ground gently "-that I cannot have both!" As the Keeper stepped down the stairs of his crystalline dungeon heart's dais, he threw the figurines aside.

They landed on a large heap of gold coins and shattered into their component gems, which rolled downhill until they came to rest in a corner. A moment later, a wave of gold coins followed them,

displaced by the weight of Mukrezar landing on top of the heap.

"Ah, that's the life!" The elven Keeper let out a content sigh as he lay down and summoned a book.

"Mukrezar!"

The crimson-eyed man calmly flipped a page of his tome.

"Mukrezar!"

He kept reading.

"MUKREZAR! Don't you dare ignore me!"

With a sigh, the Keeper pushed his hand into the loose gold and started rummaging below the surface. After a while, he fished out an active crystal ball. "Honoured High Priest," he said, his voice lacking any hint of enthusiasm, "what can I do for you? Congratulations on your *very recent* promotion, by the way."

The gilded skull in the scrying device managed to glower with the aid of an animated ruby mask that replaced portions of its long-gone face. "Why have you not contacted us yet?"

"I've been busy," Mukrezar quipped. "People to rob, dungeons to build, you know what it's like."

"None of that would have been necessary if you had just shown up in one of the temples to our Lord Crowned Death instead!"

"Ah, but that vampire teleportation spell that he equipped me with in his infinite wisdom rather disagrees with a living body. I simply could not risk using it again," Mukrezar drawled. "Besides, I thought you'd at least appreciate me not being a drain on the cult's finances."

"You owe Crowned Death!" the high priest boomed.

"And I am willing to show him the full extent of my gratitude," the pink-haired elf answered evenly.

The animated skeleton remained still as a statue for a few

heartbeats, staring straight into the Keeper's glowing eyes. "See that you do. Our Lord demands that, for now, you focus your efforts on the worms that worship the Unraveller."

Mukrezar blinked. "Hmm? I'd have thought he would prioritise that interesting new Empress."

"That blasphemer is far beyond your ability to handle. You are, in fact, expressly forbidden from interfering with her. Now go and fulfil your orders!" The crystal ball went inert.

"Reverse psychology, or simply an honest assessment?" the butler asked, having climbed the gold hill behind Mukrezar. "Now, what are you going to do, your Audaciousness?"

The pink-haired elf clapped his hands together as he sat up. "I'm going to bake the biggest cake in the world."

Silence. "Cake, Master?" The butler tilted his head to the side. "Oh, I see. This is some kind of clever allegory, is it not?" His face fell when Mukrezar just grinned and shook his head.

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Twisted Energies

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Ami's blue hair, still damp from a recent shower, glistened in the glare of the spotlight illuminating the workbench before her. With a skip in her step, she moved closer and opened one of the six cages cut directly into the wall behind it. The plumage of the chicken inside felt soft under her hands as she picked the drowsy-looking bird up.

"Now, now, you seem to be in a rather good mood, Mercury," Snyder commented. The acolyte waited a few steps behind her, his white-and-red robes standing out bright against the background of the dimly-lit laboratory. "I confess that this surprises me, since I expected you to feel rather miserable due to the treatment. You did, after all, vanish into thin air so quickly that you took your tentacled assistant with you."

With the hen in her arms, Ami smiled over her shoulder at him. "Thanks for your concern, but I was feeling fine, if a bit slimy. I only wanted to get away from the Light magic residue in the room as quickly as possible. All of this gave me a great idea, too!"

"Oh?"

Ami put the chicken on the metal surface before her, gently keeping one hand on the animal's back until it sat down. "Yes, I think I know how to cure cursed wounds now," she said. "I got good scans of Crowned Death's poisonous power in action, as well as of your healing spells." She put her palmtop on the table and called two different graphs up onto the screen. Her fingers touched a button, and another image joined the curves already being displayed. "And this is Metallia's power. Can you see the similarities and differences here?"

"I'm afraid this is beyond my area of expertise," Snyder commented in a dry tone of voice. "However, the chicken seems to be showing a keen interest."

Ami quickly pushed the hen's head aside before it could peck at the keyboard. "Well, in short, I believe that it may be possible to transform one type of energy into another. This would allow me to make a healing version of Crowned Death's poison that would feast on the curse." Her smile became more predatory as she imagined how the dark god would react to having the damage he caused undone by his own trick. "No matter how much the curse resists, the healing spell will grow stronger and stronger until it overwhelms it." She deflated and clasped her hands together before her chest. "Unfortunately, I'll have to research how to create such a spell step by step first, which is why I need your aid. I don't want the results tainted by me being unfamiliar with any actual Light healing spells, so I'll stick to the basics. I convert some energy, you use it to cast the spell."

"You believe that emulating the power of the Light will be the easiest of these steps?" Snyder asked, raising one eyebrow.

Ami nodded. "I'll start with life energy as a base, since both have very similar base qualities," Ami said. She briefly touched the chicken with two fingers and drew forth a pale white thread of light.

The animal toppled sideways without a sound.

Ami gathered the life energy into a tiny, glowing ball that floated between her palms, barely visible in front of her black leotard.

Snyder crossed his arms and watched her intently as her fingers started a spider-like dance around the immaterial sphere, keeping his face neutral.

Eyes narrowed in concentration, she barely noticed the inside of her visor taking on a violet tint as the crimson light shining through it grew in intensity. The fine manipulation required for restructuring the hen's life force with weak pulses of Metallia's dark power tested the limits of her casting skills. After about ten minutes of work, she looked up at Snyder with pearls of sweat glittering on her brow. "I did it!" She exclaimed, a bright smile on her face, and held out the now whiter ball for the acolyte to see.

"Not to sound overly sceptical, but I can't help notice that you are not

shying away from that little clump of magic."

"I consider that an unintended feature," Ami said. "It's impossible for me to emulate every little fluctuation, so I focused on getting the important properties correct. According to my scanner, this altered ball of energy is almost identical to the power of the Light gods. Here, take it!"

Ami held out the glowing marble for Snyder, who extended his thumb and index finger to form a crescent-shaped arc. With a jerk, the ball of magical power snapped into place between the two digits.

The acolyte lifted it to eye height and peered at it curiously. "Ah, well, it seems to feel right, at least. I am unsure whether to feel amazed or worried. Copying the magic of the Light by using a chicken seems rather, well, disrespectful. I would expect there to be a rule against it, had anyone considered the possibility." He shook his head and sighed. "Very well. How do we proceed?"

"Well, it's supposed to go into a healing spell, so..." Ami leaned over the unconscious chicken. While it was ultimately destined to end up in a cooking pot, she didn't want to seriously hurt it. Thus, she parted the animal's plumage until she could see its skin, and then deftly plucked out a single feather. "Can you heal that, please?" she asked, pointing at the spot from which a single drop of blood was welling up.

"All right." Snyder stepped up to the table and thrust out the hand holding the white glow. "I am starting to shape the spell now."

Ami held still, eager to record every little detail of the process.

"Something feels off here," the redhead commented as the glow slowly seeped back into the hen. "Is this really working?"

"I can see the puncture in the skin closing underneath the scab," Ami confirmed. "The remaining energy is being reabsorbed back into the body just fine, too."

The hen twitched and opened one eye. Startled, it pecked at Snyder's hand, causing the rotund man to take a step back.

"I must say that I did not actually expect you to succeed on the first try," the redhead admitted. "The bird does look rather lethargic, though."

"No change from before, then," Ami said, beaming. "Now, with the first step done, I should repeat the process and try to do it myself. You used-"

She stopped when her computer started beeping.

The hen batted her wings and hopped away from the noisy object even as Ami whirled around to look at the screen.

Gaze focused on the red numbers scrolling across the display, she started typing furiously before suddenly looking up at the bird. Her eyes went round. "Duck!"

"What is-" was as far as the redhead got before Ami tackled him to the ground and shoved him underneath the table.

Above them, the chicken tilted its head to the side and clucked questioningly as its body swelled.

Ami heard a sound not unlike a balloon popping, and then feathers and less savoury chunks started raining down onto the ground around them and making pattering noises on the surface above. She grimaced and blinked, then went cross-eyed when a red-tipped feather landed on her nose.

From underneath the table, Snyder stared at the grisly display, brown eyes wide and jaw agape. After a while, he gulped and said "It- it seems that your declaration of success was somewhat premature."

Ami nodded quietly, her face pale. "That's one way to put it." Shock at her experiment failing so spectacularly almost paralysed her.

While she pondered what could have gone wrong, rats emerged from the shadows and started feasting on the remains of the unlucky test subject.

Ami didn't put a stop to their clean-up efforts. With an exertion of

will, she transported herself and Snyder to a spot outside of the mess so they could stand up. She carefully avoided looking too closely at the sights, and ordered two imps to show up with mops and buckets of water. "I was so sure I had it right, too." She was grateful for her uniform's gloves when one of the imps fetched her Mercury computer from the table and handed it to her after wiping it clean. "Hmm, perhaps if I..."

"Excuse me for being pessimistic, but after seeing the results of the first try, I think it would make more sense to develop your spell first and then teach it to someone who can use the true power of the Light, rather than your substitute."

Ami's typing paused, and she met his gaze. "The problem with that is twofold. For one, some of the necessary interactions will most likely require having access to two different flavours of magical power. I was using Metallia's magic to shape the life energy during this experiment. The second issue is one of skill. Not to disparage your abilities, but I was using the dungeon heart to flawlessly repeat fine manipulation and stabilise the process. You would find this exceedingly hard to duplicate."

Snyder scratched his chin. "Perhaps that is the source of the problem. The dungeon heart is an evil artefact and wellspring of corruption, after all."

"The corruption *shouldn't* interfere with the function of anything I do," Ami said. "Then again, I was trying to create something that is diametrically opposed to it." Some of her confidence returned. "I'll keep an eye on that potential interference for my next try."

"You are still determined to follow this course of action, despite what happened?"

"Well, some setbacks are to be expected-"

At that point, one of the rats nibbling on the chicken remains popped and exploded into a cloud of grey fur and reddish bits.

Ami blinked. "-but perhaps I should try making some tools for letting someone else work with Metallia's power first," she finished.

Something like that potentially happening to her patients was not something she wanted to think about.

Three different chimes rang in rapid succession, their sound echoing and rebounding between the catwalks and bare walls of Ami's vast laboratory.

Its owner raised her head in surprise. She needed a moment to recognised the noise as the doorbell in the antechamber of her study. In theory, her employees could use it when they wanted an audience with her, but in practice, this was the first time she had heard it. The people she interacted with on a daily bases could either teleport or contact her telepathically.

Her Keeper sight showed her a small green figure covered with a hooded leather coat one size too large for it. One of the goblin's hands remained around the cord for ringing the doorbell as his head twisted left and right and his gaze darted about the brightly-lit waiting room. It brushed over the unoccupied, padded chairs lining the walls, but lingered on the ornate wooden door before him most of the time.

If the water dripping off his raincoat and onto the marble floor was any identification, then the jittery and panting creature had run all the way from the surface to get to this chamber. Ami closed the copper-bound tome in front of her and transported herself to her study, wondering what the little creature wanted to tell her so urgently. She gestured, causing the double door to swing open.

The goblin jumped a step back as the door wings parted, splitting the largest of the Mercury symbols carved into the portal in two. He blinked up at Ami's red-eyed silhouette blocking the doorway, and dropped to one knee.

"Your Majesty!" he blurted out, spittle flying from his tongue. "We did well! We caught spy!"

"A spy?" Ami felt alarmed. Were other Keepers scouting her lands? "Who, where, and what happened?" she asked. "Oh, and you may

rise."

The green creature jumped to its feet. "Spy circling windmills. Zoom! Zoom!" the goblin reported spinning around his own axis as he mimed the action with one extended arm. "We rode flies to force down! Orcs pounced, and now dragging here with loot!"

"A spy with loot?" The teenage empress turned toward the entrance, where the sound of mixed footsteps approached from outside.

Two pink-skinned orcs wearing leather raincoats similar to the goblin's walked in, their grins showing off large, crooked teeth underneath knobbly noses. Each of them held one end of an elongated, roughly human-sized bag that wriggled in their grip.

Behind these leaders, a sturdy chest with a rounded lid wobbled in, carried by a gaggle of imps. Even the mud splatters coating it couldn't entirely hide the intricately-crafted silver insets that decorated the dark wood.

"Your Imperial Majesty," the orc to the left spoke while he saluted with his free hand. "We present the prisoner!" He let go of his side of the bag, and his partner upended it by raising the other end over his head.

A slight figure half-slid, half fell out of the opening. The mud-stained and soaking wet girl let out a muffled grunt through her gag when she hit the floor tiles. Yellow eyes glared up at Ami from underneath a diadem that sat askew on its shivering owner's brow.

"Camilla? Let her go!" In an instant, Ami was kneeling in front of the girl and untying the cloth draped over the blonde fairy's mouth. Had her guards just roughed up the new ambassador from the Shining Concord Empire? Ami's eyes took in the magnificent blue, red, and white feather pattern of the fae's open-backed dress. It certainly looked like it. "Are you all right?"

Camilla spat out the piece of cloth in her mouth and grimaced. "C-c-cold," the drenched fairy stuttered, then sneezed.

Diplomacy was off to a *great* start.

"...and then, as if the sleet wasn't enough already, your stupid goblins jumped off those horrible flies and onto my carpet," Camilla said, far more lively now that she was wrapped in a warm blanket and had her feet submerged in a tub filled with hot water. "It's not meant to carry that much weight! What did they *think* would happen?"

"I'm very sorry about this," Ami said, lowering her head. "No offence was intended. I could heal those bruises for you," she offered, reaching toward the sitting fairy with a hand that glowed green at the fingertips.

Her guest shied away, as if she had just remembered both titles of the harmless-looking girl sitting to the left of the fireplace. Or possibly her reputation. "N- no, that's all right," she replied, pulling the blanket more tightly around her body. "Your Majesty. I can deal with that myself later."

"Very well." The cushioning of Ami's wooden chair creaked as she settled back in place. "What I don't understand is why you kept circling outside in the storm, rather than announcing yourself."

"How? Your dungeon doesn't exactly have a big front door I could have walked up to! If it wasn't for the iceberg, I wouldn't even have been able to find my way back to it!"

"Oh. Yes, I see how that would be a problem," Ami conceded. "Actually, I didn't expect you back here so soon."

"Passenger summoning spells," Camilla explained.

"Ah." Ami perked up when her Keeper senses informed her of what her minions were doing. "Good news! The imps have just found your flying carpet too. I'll have them wash it, as well as your robes of office, if that's fine with you."

The young fairy glanced to her left, where three imps in blue coveralls were crawling over her ornate wooden chest, wielding cleaning rags. Its metal parts glittered dimly in the wavering, artificial light. Camilla's gaze wandered briefly upwards, toward the strange

lamps concealed by the banks of fog wafting underneath the high ceiling. "I guess they know what they are doing. Sure. What's up with those clouds, if you don't mind me asking?"

"They offer a measure of privacy by hindering scrying attempts, Ambassador. As you are here, I assume that's your correct title now?"

The blonde crossed her arms and seemed to sink into her seat. "Well, provisional Ambassador, anyway," she said. "Whether or not a proper embassy will be established here depends on you complying with several demands, your Majesty."

Ami didn't miss that the fairy was suddenly starting to fidget. "What are those demands?"

"Ah, they are all listed in great detail in one of the scrolls in my chest. I'll get it-"

The chest opened by itself, and a large scroll case floated out. "Is that the correct one?"

Camilla nodded.

Ami remotely opened the container and summoned the rolled-up scroll within to her gloved hand. Curious about what was making the young blonde so nervous, she unrolled the scroll. Even though she would have liked to, she didn't skip the long-winded introductions, for fear of missing something important. At least, it was a treasure trove of formal phrases that she might find useful in the future. As she read, she could hear the faint hum caused by glitter flaking off the fairy. Was the girl actually holding her breath?

Ami finally got to the part that held the demands. A rather large plot of land to establish the embassy. Reasonable so far. Having her construct and furnish the embassy proper, according to the plans appended to the message. That shouldn't be a problem with the aid of the dungeon heart. Relinquishing her claim on the embassy area? She was willing to do that, yes. Was that the point that had Camilla so worried? She read on, expecting more demands, but the lengthy rest of the scroll was taken up by blueprints and exacting

specifications. She paused. Had she just read that right?

A second glance confirmed that the document indeed listed the building material for the building's many support pillars as 'silver'. She read on and kept finding gems such as façade tiles carved from the crystal-like obsidian mined only from a specific dwarven quarry, and elaborate mosaics carves from certain common gemstones. And why would an embassy even need a swimming pool, let alone one like that? "I don't even have a golden *bathtub*," she mused out loud, causing Camilla to wince.

The scroll went on in the same vein, listing furniture and items of daily use that had two things in common. They were both pretty to look at and outrageously expensive.

One of Ami's eyebrows started twitching as she kept reading. She looked up at the fairy, whose face was white as a sheet. "Are they serious? This isn't an embassy, it's a palace!"

"The Shining Concord Empire's splendour and glory must be accurately reflected in the embassy building that represent it," Camilla recited in a shaky monotone, looking as if she expected to be struck down any moment now for the perceived insult.

"This still strikes me as excessive."

"The Emperor considers this commitment a necessary token of good faith," the young fairy stated with no emotion, obviously repeating a memorised phrase.

Ami closed her eyes and forced herself to consider the situation in a calm and methodical fashion. It didn't take a genius to discern the real purpose of the pompous structure. While gauging the sincerity of her intentions was certainly one part of it, these demands were mainly meant to starve her war effort of resources. The finished embassy building would also force her to construct herself a residence that matched or exceeded its opulence, lest she lose face with her underlings.

Ami summoned her computer and started entering the numbers to get a more accurate estimate of how much this could cost her.

Camilla remained motionless and quiet while Ami's fingers danced over the keyboard, perhaps in the hopes of her presence being forgotten.

It didn't take the blue-haired girl long to compile the various expenditures into a price list. The embassy alone would cost her about as much as eight new dungeon hearts, a truly outrageous sum. However, when put into perspective with what she planned to spend on her adamantine dungeon heart, the numbers looked much less intolerable. She also felt reassured that her enemies apparently remained unaware of her gem production capabilities if they thought that targeting her wealth was an appropriate strategy for weakening her. She put her palmtop aside, a mischievous smile on her face. "Fine."

"The conditions are non-negoti- *what*?" Camilla opened the eyes she had clamped shut in fear and gaped at Ami.

"I said that I accept," Ami repeated.

"You mean it? You are not angry? I'm not going to die?" the fairy asked. When Ami nodded, the blonde visibly relaxed and let out a relieved breath.

Ami suspected that her easy acquiescence would cause sleepless nights to the people who had forced the poor girl into this situation. After all, why would the dark empress be willing to invest so much into this embassy if it didn't further her goals in some way they would all come to regret?"I wonder what the building will look like when it is done?"

"Oh, it resembles a scaled-down version of the Imperial Palace, from what I could see. Without the parks and mansions and pavilions, of course," Camilla said, more talkative now that she was miraculously still alive and in one piece.

"Hmm." Ami was already scanning the plans and arranging them three-dimensionally in space so that she could get a better idea of the building's layout. Something about the central tower struck her as familiar, and her eyes narrowed in suspicion. She rotated the view around its axis several times, but it took her zooming in and

imagining the structure from the inside to make the connection. "What exactly are you trying to pull here?" she barked at Camilla.

Faced with the young Keeper's sudden hostility, the fairy flinched away, and her pupils turned into startled pinpricks. "Wh- what do you mean?"

Instead of a reply, Ami turned her computer so that Camilla could see the display. It was still centred on the blueprints of a tower that could have been a twin of Zarekos' temple.

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Towers

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A flash of blue light briefly illuminated the interior of the eight-sided tower, crept up its glyph-encrusted brick walls, and faded away long before reaching the distant roof. In the light's wake, a twister of snowflakes dispersed, revealing two female silhouettes standing on the floor.

Ami let go of Camilla's arm and took a step away from the blonde. She gestured upwards at the enormous statue that loomed between a galaxy of ever-burning braziers, which in turn dangled from horizontal support beams. "Well?" she asked. "What do you have to say now?"

"Um, can I have some clothes, please?" Camilla asked meekly, clasping the blanket wrapped around herself tighter.

Ami paused. That was not the reaction that she had expected. Blinking, she took note of the fae's state of relative undress, and one hand rose to cover her mouth. "Oh! Of course." Mildly embarrassed, she conjured a few articles of clothing for the ambassador, whose own wardrobe was still in the wash after her goblin-induced crash in the mud. The teenage Keeper turned away while the fairy got dressed. The other girl's intimidated expression made it hard for her to maintain her initial righteous indignation. She shouldn't have forgotten that Camilla was just a glorified messenger.

"It itches a bit," the fairy commented as she adjusted her blue pants. Aside from the hole for the wings in the blouse's back, the outfit was similar to what Ami used to conjure for herself.

"I'm not a tailor, sorry," Ami apologised. "Now, I repeat. What do you have to say about this?"

Camilla looked around, taking in her surroundings properly for the first time since arriving here. Her eyes went round as she leaned back and gazed upwards. "Two things immediately come to mind,"

she said after a while. "First, why do you have an oracle tower?" She dared meet Ami's crimson-glowing eyes and looked at her accusingly. "This one is even bigger than the one at the Imperial Palace!"

"I didn't build it, I took it from Zarekos. A more interesting question would be why the Shining Concord is trying to trick me into equipping its embassy with a temple."

"Eh?" Camilla blinked several times and tilted her head to the side. "You think this is a temple?"

"Are you telling me it isn't?"

"No! It's just a common and traditional part of official buildings! It provides a place for visiting Oracles to ply their trade!" the fairy insisted. "We don't worship there. Which would be pretty difficult in the first place, since normally only Oracles or higher are allowed in there!"

Ami crossed her arms. "I have personally seen it work like a temple. Zarekos was trying to use it to ascend to godhood."

"For real?" Camilla gaped, as if she couldn't reconcile what she had just heard with what she knew. She shook her head. "That's- that's absurd! He must have been insane! Or altered the design! For one, we don't put giant statues into our towers! That was the second thing that came to mind, actually. That's an impressively ugly statue, especially with that giant sword stuck in its forehead."

"Zarekos wasn't any more attractive in person, and the statue is magically inert." Ami commented.

"Well, there's a really easy way to prove if this is a temple or not," Camilla said. "I'll just cast a holy spell, and-" she paused and looked at Ami, whose red eyes were very visible in the dim light. "- err, that is, if I'm allowed to?"

The blue-haired girl nodded. "Go on."

"Well, I'm going to cast it, and if this is a good temple, it should be stronger than usual. Or weaker if it's an evil one. Now then." The

fairy folded her hands, palms together, and pulled them slowly apart. Her face scrunched up in concentration, and her brow furrowed. Finally, a tiny white speck appeared in the gap.

"That looked as if it took a lot of effort," Ami said.

"Err, yes." Camilla looked at the ground and scratched her head. "Maybe this particular place is really a dark temple, but," she looked up suddenly and continued loudly " that doesn't mean anything! This Keeper must have altered it! It's a twisted variation!"

Ami summoned her computer and turned it so that the blonde could see the screen. "Aside from the statue and its scale, it matches the embassy blueprints. They are identical! See, this is what it's going to look like when finished." She called up the three-dimensional model her computer had rendered. "Ignore the missing colours of the model, just focus on the shape."

Camilla leaned forward until her nose almost touched the screen, her eyes big. "What is this magic?" she wondered out loud even as she narrowed her eyes and searched for any observable differences. "Hah! Got it now!" she declared triumphantly. "These plans don't show all the bells and chimes that a normal oracle tower is filled with, since they are furniture!" She pointed at the ceiling with her index finger. "This building is missing them too, so its purpose must be different!"

"Hmm. That would depend on what they are used for." Ami was not convinced that *adding* something would make the place *less* of a temple. In her opinion, the round-faced fairy really was unaware of the more sinister functions of this structure and grasping at straws here. Then again, she might be right. Ami had no proof that Zarekos hadn't modified the design in subtle ways. Or maybe he had simply used it differently? The Concord's population was unlikely to tolerate towers swamped with tormented ghosts. Her face hardened at the memories of this place before she had claimed it.

"Hey, there's no reason to look angry!" Camilla said, hiding her face behind her waving hands. "Oh, I think I can prove that this thing is different from our oracle towers!" The fairy spread her wings and darted upwards, leaving a trail of glitter in the air.

"Wait, what are you doing?" Ami asked, taking to the air herself and chasing after the blonde. Both girls gained altitude quickly as floor after floor rushed past them.

"I've got to go to the spot where the Oracle would be meditating," Camilla shouted downwards. She alighted on top of the statue's bald scalp. "That would be around here. Right there!" She pointed right at the pentagram painted on the sculpture's brow, not far above the point where the enormous sword blade had forced itself into the stone.

Having the fairy point out the location that Zarekos' shade had occupied did little to assuage Ami's suspicions. "What are you planning?"

"I remember the incantations from when I was being tested for oracle potential. Nobody in my family had enough to properly activate a tower, but I can manage the projection trance for a short time." Camilla started beaming. "It's perfect! See? I'll try the incantation, and then when nothing happens, you'll know this tower is different from ours!"

"Not exactly," Ami said, feeling a pang of homesickness upon hearing that piece of Usagi-like logic. "If nothing happens, it could also mean that you did not get the spell right, or simply misremembered it."

The fae's face fell. "Oh."

"You could give it a try anyway," Ami suggested, unable to stand up to Camilla's kicked-puppy look. At this point, the blonde probably wanted to reassure herself that her home nation wasn't - perhaps unwittingly - putting evil architecture everywhere important. The young Keeper didn't find that idea reassuring in the least, either. Curious about what would happen, she activated her visor. "Start whenever you are ready."

The blonde nodded. "Okay." She sat down cross-legged in the middle of the pentagram and fidgeted until she found the right spot, then closed her eyes and muttered three multisyllabic words.

For an instant, nothing happened aside from the young fairies voice echoing within the octagonal hollow, but then Ami realised that the echoes weren't fading away. Instead, they started overlapping more and more each time the walls reflected them. Finally, they blended into a single, indistinct hum that made Ami's hackles rise. For an instant, she felt as if the noise was pressing down on her from all sides, making her bones resonate. Then, it was suddenly gone.

"Oh no! This can't be working!" Camilla shouted, waving her transparent hands in front of her face. She seemed more distressed by the fact that her spell had succeeded than by her current ghost-like state.

With a sinking feelint, Ami noted the similarity that the immaterial fairy now bore to the late Zarekos. Almost without thinking, she transported herself in front of the blonde, who let out a startled squawk and recoiled. The young Keeper jabbed her index finger at the fae's right arm.

"Ow!"Camilla protested as a tiny spark jumped over, and she backed away, drifting through the air without using her wings. "What was that for?"

"Sorry, just a test. When I fought Zarekos, he was using a similar effect, though his version was more effective than yours," she explained. Her eyes narrowed at the wraith-like girl. "Nevertheless, we are going to have a very thorough discussion about what exactly it is your Oracles do with these buildings!"

"I'm not allowed to divulge state secrets," the blonde responded in a tiny voice and crossed her arms. She managed to return the Keeper's gaze impassively for several heartbeats before her projection trance guttered out, causing her to succumb to gravity with a startled gasp.

King Albrecht remained silent as he contemplated the wrinkly, hunched-over figure of abbot Durval sitting across from him at the table. His heart was heavy with the knowledge of what he would soon request of the pious man.

"With all due respect, your Majesty, I should be at the front with Baron Leopold, rather than having tea here with you," Durval spoke as he put his empty porcelain cup down on its plate.

"I know, I know," Albrecht sighed. "Unfortunately, I fear that the good Baron may have to do without your aid for a while. I have a different task for you."

"Your Majesty?"

"Spymaster, please show him the list."

A figure clad in black, concealing robes stepped out of the shadows behind the king's high-backed armchair and slid noiselessly toward one of the shelves. With a deft motion, the cowled man selected one thick scroll from a pile that held many, and handed it to Durval.

Parchment rustled as the abbot unrolled it. His eyes darted left and right as they skimmed over the columns. "Names?"

"Yes. They belong to hundreds of our citizens confirmed missing. Most of them disappeared during attacks on their villages by Underworld forces, others simply never arrived at their destination," the spymaster explained.

"They are in the hands of Empress Mercury," Albrecht said. He barely resisted the urge to grit his teeth in anger, both at having his subjects in danger and at having to debase the title of "Empress" by using it for such a vile creature. "She sent this list along with a letter. The gist of it is that she *liberated* them from Dreadfog Island, but that they *unfortunately* won't be able to leave her realm without *complications* that resulted from her method of healing them." The king's voice was dripping with sarcasm.

"Complications?" Durval asked, raising his eyebrows.

"Spontaneous eyeball disintegration," the spymaster informed him.

Durval blinked several times. "I see. In other words, she is holding them hostage. Has she made any demands yet?"

Albrecht nodded. "Not that she had the decency to outright call them

demands. Instead, she's *respectfully* requesting supplies that her *guests* will need in daily life, such as clothes. Or schoolbooks."

"Subtly reminding us that the majority of her captives are still children," Durval interjected, his brow furrowed.

King Albrecht's shoulders slumped. "There is one bigger request, however. She wants a light priest with at least an Abbot's skill level to deal with cursed wounds."

Durval's breath caught. "You are thinking of acquiescing, then. Me?"

The monarch nodded gravely. "I know it is a dangerous and terrifying task, and I apologise for imposing it on you. However, I need to think of the good of my subjects. All of my subjects. Having at least one representant of the Light over there to lessen their suffering would go a long way."

The abbot closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "And since I no longer have an abbey to lead after Arachne murdered my flock, I am the logical choice," he said bitterly.

"If it consoles you, Keeper Arachne was recently destroyed by Keeper Alphel," the spymaster said. "Quite surprising, actually, since she was believed to have been drastically weakened after her defeat at Mercury's hands."

"Durval, I wouldn't be asking this of you if I didn't think it was the best course of action," Albrecht said, feeling old. "Spymaster, tell him about your theory."

"Of course, Sire. While the dark empress ostensibly needs a priest to look after her captives, this is very uncharacteristic behaviour for a Keeper. Yet, the part about needing help with cursed wounds may be true. She *did* wrestle with a lesser aspect of a dark god recently. There is no good reason to assume that she escaped unscathed."

The holy man sat up straight. "You think it might be herself who is afflicted by incurable wounds? That would indeed explain her request for a skilled healer." His eyes narrowed. "It would be an unprecedented chance to get close to her real body."

Albrecht nodded. "I see you understand. It could be an opportunity to achieve what even the Avatar couldn't."

"A fat lot of use *he* has been so far," Durval grumbled. "Since his foray into the Underworld, terrified denizens are lining up for a chance to be recruited by Keepers."

"Now, now, credit where credit is due. He drove off Keepers Balcarn, Ruletta, and Trenor almost single-handedly," the king admonished mildly. While he was mildly disappointed by the champion of the Light's almost single-minded focus on bringing low the resurrected Mukrezar, he couldn't fault the man's combat prowess.

"Actually, Balcarn's forces were back-stabbed by Keeper Tagleos during the battle," the spymaster pointed out.

"Tagleos? I have not heard of him," Durval commented, looking confused.

"He's one of those minor Keepers that crawl out of the woodwork from time to time," the masked man explained. "So far only notable for his cowardice and mutated rats."

"Rats. One thing he has in common with Mercury. I had forgotten about those." Durval grimaced. "I hate rats." He let out a long sigh. "But I will do what is necessary. Sire, by your leave? I have prayers and travel preparations to make." He rose, his richly-embroidered robe swishing around him.

Albrecht got up too, and took his hand. "Thank you for agreeing to this," the king said. "You are a courageous man, and will, of course, be rewarded richly for your service. I only wish there was more I could do to ensure your safety."

"I trust in the Light to guide my path." Durval bowed and left the room, leaning on his staff.

"Shoo! Go away!"

An imp shot out of the doorway, her speedy retreat assisted by a light swat on the bottom with the bristly end of a broom. The door slammed shut behind the helmeted creature, stopping the smell of freshly-baked bread from leaking out into the corridor. Only an orange glow kept seeping out from under the door.

"And stay out!" The broom-wielding man leaned the cleaning implement against the wall and turned to his guest. "Sorry about that. The obsessed little bastard keeps trying to sneak in and mess up the place. Didn't pay attention just once, and now I've got that ugly gargoyle picture engraved on one side of my oven." He pointed at the large brick construction that resembled the top half of an egg. "Hey, what are you doing?"

The insect-winged girl he was talking to was on all fours and peering curiously into the red-glowing opening underneath the oven. "This is so strange. There's no fire and I can sense no magic, and yet it burns! How does it work?" Camilla didn't usually try to figure out how strange artefacts functioned, but it was a way to occupy her mind that didn't involve thinking about what the empress had shown her at that tower.

The baker shrugged. "Beats me. I try not to think too much about how the dark empress accomplishes things." He wiped his hands on his apron. "Convenient, admittedly. No more fooling around with wood or coal."

"Sounds great." Camilla got up from the floor and smiled. "You must be happy about that."

"I'd be a lot happier if I didn't know where the flour comes from," Ulrich said.

The fairy's hand stopped halfway toward a crate full of delicious-smelling fresh buns. "What do you mean?"

"Well, they harvest the wheat from these odd little chambers." He shook his head in a mixture of amazement and disapproval. "Portcullis opens and steam pours out, along with a stench like you wouldn't believe. And inside, you have rows of pots on shelves, with the plants stretching like supplicants towards menacing sun faces on

the walls and ceiling." The large man made a reaching gesture with his arms to illustrate the shape of the plants.

"I have seen some imps drag bags of grain around," Camilla said. "So it's grown here, underground?"

"Yeah, she has a bunch of the other villagers working as farmers. They harvest it, and her bug-eyed little beasts bring it over to the miller, who sends the flour to me."

"Wait a moment, how can there be a harvest already? This dungeon hasn't existed long enough to give the plants enough time to grow!"

Ulrich shuddered. "Don't remind me. Some guy in the second dorm was stupid enough to ask the empress how that works."

"Did she hurt him?"

"Worse. She answered the question."

"It's the fertiliser?" Camilla guessed and gulped. Her sisters would have recognised her tone as the same one she'd use as a child when they were exchanging scary stories around a camp fire."Does she grind up-"

"No, no, nothing like that. At least, compost would be natural. It's worse! Necromancy! She's somehow shortening the crop's life so it matures in a few days! Who knows how much of that vileness sticks around after the harvest? Not me, certainly, I'm just a baker. It's unnatural, I tell you! I can't even look at dough any more without worrying if it's going to turn into some horrible thing that's going to attack me!" He frowned at the large bowl sitting on the table.

Camilla glanced at the pasty-looking dough within and batted her wings instinctively, ready to take to the air at a moment's notice while she evaluated the threat. After a moment, she shook her head, and her features relaxed. "If what I remember from magical theory classes is correct, then there shouldn't be a problem." She stepped up to the bowl and grinned teasingly at the baker. "But if it makes you feel better, I can cast a healing spell on it!" She reached out over the opening, but then spotted movement below. Reflexively,

her gaze flitted downward, just in time to spot the dough turn into a crude, slimy hand that grasped at her own. With a high-pitched scream, the young fairy darted backwards and tripped over a bag of flour. As she landed on the pile of bags and stirred up a white cloud, she could hear a male scream of fright that mirrored her own and - laughter?

Confused, Camilla sat up and blinked to get the flour out of her eyelashes.

The hand made of dough was hanging half over the edge of the bowl, already melting back into a shapeless mass, and the guffawing was coming from the door.

A man built like a bear filled the doorway, doubled over from laughter. "Oh wow! You- ha! You should have seen your faces!" He managed to cough out between laughs. He wriggled the fingers of his right hand, and the dough followed the motion like a glove.

"Robin! You are such an arsehole!" Ulrich bellowed, his arms akimbo.

"You are mean!" Camilla declared. She pouted and crossed her arms, two angry red spots appearing on her cheeks.

"Sorry, the opportunity was too good to pass up," the huge man apologised and wiped the tears of laughter from his eyes. "No hard feelings?"

"This goat-bearded fool is Robin, who was once a wizard's apprentice, but got kicked out for some inexplicable reason," Ulrich introduced the giant of a man.

"And who are you, young lady?" Robin asked. "Haven't seen you here before. I would have remembered a fairy."

"That's the Ambassador from the Shining Concord Empire you just scared to death there," Ulrich said, still glaring.

"An Ambassador? Her?" Robin peered at the fairy with interest, looking her up and down. His eyebrows rose. "They probably couldn't find some pompous old geezer willing to fill the position

here, eh? Though you aren't exactly dressed for the job, *your Excellency*."

"My proper robes of office are in the wash due to goblins being stupid," the fairy snapped. "I got these from the Empress until mine are ready!" she stated, throwing the man a haughty look.

"Those rags?" The fluffy-bearded man raised an eyebrow. "You know, she may be subtly trying to tell you something. You pissed her off recently?"

"Something like that," Camilla admitted, and her posture slumped. Mercury had not been happy with her refusal to provide details about what Oracles did in their towers. Which she didn't want to think about. Even if it related to national security. Which she, in light of recent revelations, really didn't want to think about. She was missing her sisters already. Cerasse would be able to tell her what she was missing here, she was sure of it.

"I bet that's why you are currently mingling with us commoners, then," Robin said in a reconciliatory tone of voice. "Now, now, don't look so glum. We aren't that bad."

"Robin, don't you have a job to get back to?" Ulrich reminded the hulking brute.

"Alas, you would send me back there?" Robin clutched his heart, as if shot. "Truly, you are as cold-hearted as the Empress, whose cruelty knows no limit!"

"What does he do?" Camilla asked, turning to the baker.

"I risk my health and sanity dealing with-"

"He's a teacher," Ulrich ruined Robin's spiel. "For the younger children, to be precise. Though in his case, he's doing more clowning around with magical tricks than teaching."

"Teaching the children?" Camilla said. That didn't make sense, unless..."That means the Empress wants to keep you all here for a long time!" she blurted out.

"As if that hadn't been obvious the moment she rigged our eyes to disappear if we try to leave!" Robin growled. He looked dead serious for a change.

"She what?" Camilla paled. "But that's - that's..." she trailed off, feeling stupid. Evil. Obviously. Mercury was an evil Keeper, even if she didn't flaunt it openly. To Camilla's horror, she found that she had come to think of her as just another monarch, if a strange and unusually approachable one. The dark empress' gentle façade was insidious. To think that she would find a cure for cursed blindness, only to taint it such!

"She put a spell on you that destroys your eyes if you get too far away? That's so cruel! Is there a way to remove it?"

Robin shook his head. "It's not that simple, she already thought of that possibility. There's no spell on our eyes, our eyes *are* the enchantment. If we get out of range, it will cease to affect us."

Camilla clenched her fists. That made breaking their chains impossible. Unless... as an ambassador, she should be able to move around more freely than these poor victims. Perhaps she could do some spying, rather than being a useless figurehead? Yes! She would help those people by finding the anchor of the enchantment and then help them escape with it!

Kunzite entered the circle of relative brightness surrounding queen Beryl's throne and bowed his head before his ruler, who barely reacted to his arrival. Instead, her stony-faced gaze remained fixated on Nephrite and Zoisite.

"His dark crystal is reacting to targets that mine isn't!" the effeminate-looking blonde hovering in the air accused, and produced an elongated black device. "He must have sabotaged it!"

"You had me give you the original," Nephrite pointed out, looking rather smug. "Why would I sabotage my own crystal? It's not my fault that you don't have the skill to use it correctly."

"No amount of skill will overcome the limitations of flawed equipment!" Zoisite snapped. He landed and addressed Queen Beryl directly. "My Queen, in the interest of finding the silver crystal quickly, please order him to exchange crystals with me!"

"In the interest of finding the silver crystal, you should be doing your job, rather than spying on me!"

"Enough with this bickering!" the evil queen's eyes flashed dangerously, and her mane of red hair blew upwards as she awed her generals into silence with a burst of power. "I am not interested in your excuses. Report what progress you have made!"

The wavy-haired general was the first to step forward. "Queen Beryl. The incidents of insubordination and rebellion among the youma have fallen to almost nothing, thanks to the efforts of the Inquisition and of the decisive example you made of the discovered traitors."

Kunzite thought that this was more due to the stop of the arbitrary arrests, but wisely kept his mouth shut.

Queen Beryl nodded slowly, apparently satisfied by Nephrite's barely-disguised flattery. She looked at Zoisite.

Since Kunzite was well aware of his boyfriend's lack of progress in his search, he took the opportunity to interrupt. Cape waving behind him, he stepped in front of the fidgeting general, confident that his news would monopolise his queen's attention. "Your Majesty, my special project has come to fruition."

Beryl's fingers stopped gliding over the surface of the black crystal ball topping her staff, and she leaned forward, a hungry look on her face. "Tell me more."

"One of the prepared youma is now with the traitor Jadeite." Kunzite's smile was that of a predator spotting wounded prey. "We can send forces after him whenever you desire."

Family Matters

Originally on 2011-09-18T23:00:00

Sailor Moon followed Mrs Mizuno through the latter's spacious apartment and into the living room. When the door swung open, she almost missed a step. Books, candles, various tapestries, and exotic-looking idols had transformed the place into something akin to a fortune teller's tent.

"Please have a seat." Dr Mizuno cleared some space on the table, gathering a stack of books into her arms.

Sailor Moon blinked at the contrast between the woman's prim business suit and the book covers covered in occult symbols.

Mrs Mizuno noticed the magical girl's surprise, and let out an embarrassed laugh. "Oh, all of this is research material! I just found out that magic is real and that it made my daughter disappear! Of course I'm going to learn everything I can about the subject!"

"Ah. Does any of this really work?" Sailor Moon eyed one of the colourful masks on the wall dubiously, since it resembled a youma she had once fought.

"I am having trouble discerning the real from mere folklore, superstition, and outright scams," the doctor admitted. "Could you perhaps assist me with that?"

"Me?" Sailor Moon pointed at herself. The sheer amount of books in the room was rather intimidating. "I only use magic," she said quickly. "I don't actually know how it works! I say the spell, something happens!"

Dr Mizuno frowned. "In that case, I would like to talk at some point to the person who taught you."

Sailor Moon associated bad things with the expression on the older woman's face. Her own mother wore the same one whenever she

wanted to talk about Usagi's scholastic performance. "Err, I'll let her know," she agreed in a heartbeat. Let Luna handle this!

In an effort to change the subject, the blonde retrieved a crystal ball from the bag slung over her shoulder, and placed it on the table. "Let's see how Ami is doing, okay?"

A picture of box-like wooden walls formed in the scrying device. Only the glow of the crystal ball at the other end of the connection lit the tiny space's interior.

"Oh, that's the inside of a drawer," Sailor Moon realised after a moment.

"Then let's search for Ami," Mrs Mizuno suggested eagerly and reached toward the orb.

"That's not a good idea," Sailor Moon blurted out. She grabbed the ball and pulled it closer to herself, covering the smooth surface protectively with her hands. "You don't want to be blinded! Ami has put bright lights everywhere! They go off like extra-strong camera flashes when someone tries to scry on her without permission!"

"Sensible." Mrs Mizuno clearly approved of her daughter protecting her privacy. "Now, how do we let her know that we want to talk to her?"

"Ami? Ami! Are you around?" Sailor Moon called out loudly.

Mrs Mizuno winced at the volume and shot the blonde an incredulous look. "Shouting?"

Sailor Moon shrugged and looked apologetic.

In the crystal ball, something moved. The image within shook as the drawer opened and a shadow appeared in the gap outside.

"What is *that*?" the older woman asked in a whisper, staring at the slender appendage that was slithering in through the opening.

The tentacle felt around in the confined space until it touched the crystal ball and wrapped itself around the bottom of the scrying

device. Lodged securely around the narrow part where the transparent sphere connected to the flaring pedestal, it withdrew from the drawer, taking its catch with it.

"Why is there a *tentacle monster* in my daughter's bedroom?" Mrs Mizuno screeched as a great mound of black-ringed green tentacles, dotted with the occasional eye, came into view.

"Um," Sailor Moon's eyes were wide, and she twirled one of her long pigtails nervously. "I think it's some kind of pet?"

"Pet?" the pale doctor repeated in a small voice.

The creature put the scrying device on the bedside locker and focused most of its eyes on it. Its many pseudopodia wriggled to the left and right.

"That almost looks as if it's shaking its head," the blonde noted. "Hey you! What are you doing in Ami's- I mean the Empress' room?"

The mass of tentacles quivered for a moment and then slowly ambled over toward the exit. It grabbed the door handle with several pseudopodia and started rattling the sturdy portal to no apparent effect.

"You are locked in?" Sailor Moon asked.

The creature bobbed up and down, which may have been a shrug or a nod.

"That thing can understand you?" Mrs Mizuno asked. She was watching the strange creature with horrified fascination and looked a little green around the nose.

"Seems so. Hey, do you know where the Empress is?"

The tentacle monster shook once more and burst into a flurry of activity. It used several tentacles to snatch Ami's arcane tomes from the desk and flipped them open. With another tentacle, it picked up the crystal ball and dangled it over the collection. More tentacles appeared, moving to different spots on the pages and tapping them.

"Huh?" Sailor Moon looked at the proceedings with a blank expression. "What is it doing?"

"It can't talk," Dr Mizuno assumed. "Instead, it's pointing at words in the books! To think that such an odd creature knows how to read..."

"Oh. What is it saying?"

"I don't know. I can't read that language," Mrs Mizuno reminded the blonde.

Sailor Moon squinted and paid more attention to the words that the tentacle monster was indicating. "Try. Striped. One. Crystal. Spherical." She read out loud. "What does it mean?"

"Crystal Sphere. Another crystal ball? 'Try' seems clear enough, so 'Striped One' could be a name or a place description," the blue-haired woman pondered.

"Striped One." The magical girl frowned. "Do you mean Tiger?"

The writhing mass bobbed once more, flipped a page, and stabbed a tentacle down on the word 'positive'.

"Okay then, I'll try that. Thanks." Sailor Moon sighed and let the connection flicker out.

"Tiger?" Dr Mizuno asked.

"A youma who is working for Ami. She isn't nice," the pigtailed girl explained. "All right, let's give this a try and hope she won't give us too much trouble."

With walls of dark, bluish stone and pale lights that rested on top of slender pillars, Tiger's office resembled Queen Beryl's throne room. Wall cabinets with tinted windows hid most of the paperwork so that nothing distracted from the massive desk that dominated the room.

In theory, Tiger would be an intimidating sight to behold when seated in the throne-like chair behind the polished desk. In practice,

the youma's left cheek rested on the documents before her as she snored quietly.

The crystal ball on the corner of the desk came alive, casting more light onto the dozing figure and causing the highlights in her blue hair to gleam brighter.

"Ami?" a familiar voice gasped.

"Yes?" Tiger responded sleepily as she started awake and raised her head. Blinking, she brushed away the sheet of paper still stuck to her face before recognition of the voice fully set in. Her head whirled toward the crystal, eyes wide. "Mu- moment, please?"

A second face appeared in the sphere, frowning. "Tiger! Don't you dare try that again!"

"Oh. Hello, Sailor Moon." The youma went through several different facial expressions in short order, reflecting her inner turmoil. In order, they were shock at seeing the person who her memories designated as her mother, irritation at Sailor Moon butting in, depression at having made the blonde dislike her, longing for a friendship that had never been hers, and self-loathing for being so weak that she actually desired things like that. She turned away so the others couldn't watch her face. "What do you want?" she snapped.

"We are looking for Ami," Sailor Moon said, her arms akimbo as she glowered through the sphere. "Could you get her, please?"

"Right." Tiger stood up, eager to flee this situation.

"Wait!" Mrs Mizuno shouted, causing the youma to hesitate. "Why do you look so much like Ami?"

While Tiger was more muscular and taller than Ami, their resemblance was too great to be coincidence. It was obvious to the youma that her- Ami's mother had noticed that too. While part of her would have enjoyed explaining to the woman in great detail what her daughter had done to her, another was terrified of finding out what the woman would think. Or, more precisely, of rejection.

"She tried to impersonate Ami before," Sailor Moon accused, "she almost caused a lot of trouble!"

"Well, maybe if you were smarter, it wouldn't have gotten that far at all!" Tiger lashed out at the blonde.

"Why would you do that?" Mrs Mizuno asked, sounding a little reproachful.

"None of your business!" Tiger snapped. She had no intention of explaining herself to them! Even a youma had her pride. "Now, if you'll excuse me..." She disappeared underneath a shell of earth-coloured rock, which crumbled away into nothingness.

Ami, clad in her school uniform, appeared in Tiger's office half a minute after the youma had vacated it. Using magic in her civilian form felt odd, since she was so unused to it. She noted in passing that the usual snowflakes accompanying her every teleport in Sailor Mercury form were missing. Interesting. More important, was the active crystal ball on the desk's mirror-smooth surface. The teenager smiled widely. "Mum! Sailor Moon!"

"Hi, Ami!" Sailor Moon greeted.

"Ami! How are you doing?" Mrs Mizuno asked, inspecting her daughter as closely as the crystal ball allowed for.

"Oh, I'm starting to feel on top of things again," the blue-haired girl reported. "I'm well rested, there is no pressing emergency, and things are looking up with the rescued villagers too!"

"I'm glad to hear that!" Dr Mizuno's smile waned slightly as her expression turned inquisitive. "Ami, that Tiger person we just talked with - I'm wondering why she looks so much like you that I mistook her for you at first glance?"

"Oh, Tiger. It's... complicated," Ami began.

"She was kind of rude," Sailor moon commented.

"Does it have something to do with the fact that she responded when I called your name?"

Ami grasped her hands in front of her skirt and looked down. "Er, somewhat. How do I put this..."

Her mother's eyes widened as an idea occurred to her. "Ami, you didn't develop some kind of monstrous alternate form to better fit your role as an evil overlord, did you?"

"What?" Ami stared. "No! Tiger's her own person!" Since her Keeper senses had located the striped youma right outside the door, eavesdropping on the conversation, she felt no compunctions about yanking her through space and to her side. "Mother, whatever gave you that idea?"

Tiger blinked in surprise, and her face fell as she recognised her surroundings.

Mrs. Mizuno blushed faintly as she looked from her daughter to the youma that stood next to her with her arms crossed. She cleared her throat. "Well, I came upon the *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* during my recent bout of research, and it didn't sound much crazier than what has already happened to you." She let out a short, embarrassed laugh. "On second thought, I really should have trusted you not to try to hide a second identity from me."

Ami almost winced and looked down in order to hide her sheepish expression. Now she felt miserable about still hiding the fact that she was Sailor Mercury. But she owed it to Sailor Moon and the others to protect their secrecy. Didn't she? From the corner of her eyes, she could see Tiger smirking.

"Hey, I remember now!" Sailor Moon shouted, pointing at the tall figure to Ami's right. "Didn't you say something about taking Ami's memories?"

"I did not *take* them!" Tiger protested loudly.

"Memories?" Dr Mizuno looked alarmed. "How did that happen?"

"Actually," Ami raised her hand to draw attention to herself, "Tiger

here has some valid to resent me, and that's also part of those reasons. In short, what happened is that- mmph!" Ami found it hard to speak through the strong hand that suddenly pressed itself against her lips.

Behind the teenager, Tiger glared. "Can we please *not* talk about that? I consider that kind of thing private!"

"Let Ami go!" came an outraged cry from the crystal ball.

"I'm not doing anything to her, sheesh," the youma said, but she took a step back and removed her hand from the teenager's mouth.

Ami looked up at the taller girl, puzzled. "But, I would have thought you'd want them to know?"

"Know what?" Mrs Mizuno frowned and was sounding worried.

"I don't need their pity!" Tiger stamped her foot angrily.

"Pity?" Sailor Moon blinked. "Why do you expect us to pity you?" There was no malice in her voice, only genuine confusion.

Dr Mizuno was thinking things through faster then the blonde and formulated a theory. "Ami, did you do something to her?"

"Not on purpose!"

"Can we *stop* talking about this already?"

Ami looked imploringly at Tiger. "What are you so afraid of? Remember what you know about them! Do you really think they wouldn't give you the chance you deserve?"

The tiger-striped youma looked at the crystal ball.

"I am certainly not going to hold anything you may have unintentionally done wrong or had no control over against you," Mrs Mizuno said with a reassuring smile.

Tiger stared at Sailor Moon, who was looking sceptical.

"Look, I still don't like the way you tried to trick us," the senshi said, "but if Ami is willing to forgive you, so am I."

Finally, the scowl on the youma's face dissipated, and her shoulders slumped in defeat. "Fine. I guess knowing one way or another is better than eternal uncertainty."

Ami patted her on the back weakly, thinking that she should do something to reassure the youma. "Well then," she started her explanation. "When Jadeite rescued Tiger from her imprisonment, her mind was gone." Her voice vent quieter. "I, err, needed a body that could use Dark Kingdom style magic at the time, so I possessed her."

Tiger harrumphed.

"It was either you or one of the other youma, who were all awake and functional at the time," Ami said apologetically. "I decided that it was better to inhabit someone who was no more self-aware than a lizard, rather than risk the death of someone with an intact personality."

"Leaving aside for the moment that I find it morally questionable to do something like that to someone who cannot give consent," Mrs Mizuno frowned, "I need some clarification about this 'possession' ability you mentioned. When you say 'possession' I think of stories where evil spirits enter someone's body and use it like a puppet."

"That's... that's pretty much exactly how it works," Ami admitted, hanging her head. "Since Tiger is a youma and made of magic, her appearance depends a lot on her self-image. Now, when I was in control, the body changed to resemble me. Except when I left, she was kind of stuck that way."

"That was very irresponsible of you, Ami." Mrs Mizuno chided. She glanced over at Tiger. "Is that why you dislike my daughter? We are, of course, going to fix this. Right Ami?"

"No, Mum, its worse than that," Ami confessed. "This isn't all. When we managed to restore her sanity later, it turned out that many of my memories had imprinted on her too. She has my memories. She

remembers *you* raising her. She remembers being friends with my friends. And then it turned out that nothing of it was real."

"You- you are Ami too, then?" Dr Mizuno asked for clarification. She swayed, causing Sailor Moon to quickly put a steadying hand on her shoulder.

"I'm not a copy!" Tiger contradicted. "Just because I look like her and remember much the same things as she does, I'm not like her. I wouldn't like being that meek, for example," she taunted with a sideways glance at the shorter teenager. "I'd be the older and bolder sibling, at the very least!"

"Hmm, they kind of *do* look like sisters when they stand next to each other like that," Sailor Moon said when the ensuing silence threatened to turn awkward.

This prompted Ami and Tiger to look at each other. Sure enough, they both stood with their backs straight and their hands in front of themselves, fidgeting slightly.

It was clear from Mrs Mizuno's facial expression that she had trouble with the concept of suddenly having acquired a second daughter. A daughter who was older than her first, had skin covered in a strange striped pattern, and tiny horns. Finally, she let out a long sigh. "I'm glad I'm sitting down already. Well, they say that parenthood is full of unexpected surprises." She let out a short laugh. "I certainly never expected to become a mother again - with so little warning at that."

Tiger's eyes lit up with hope. "Y-you mean it?"Mrs Mizuno nodded. "How could I be so cruel as to turn you away when you know me so well already? Besides, as Ami's parent, I must take responsibility for her actions. Welcome to the family."

Tiger turned away "I'm not good at this mushy stuff," she explained. A hint of tears glittered in the corners of her eyes.

"Ami, give her a hug for me," the doctor ordered.

The young Keeper complied, reaching awkwardly around the youma, who didn't resist.

"So- you were nasty to Ami because you thought we wouldn't like you?" Sailor Moon asked, her eyes wide.

Tiger extricated herself from her adopted sister's embrace and nodded. "What else was I supposed to think? You senshi kill youma!"

Sailor Moon looked taken aback. "That's because they attack us first! None of them ever try to talk! I'd love not having to fight!"

"Tiger, you can take over Umbra's magic lessons for the senshi so you can discuss this properly, if that's all right with both of you?" Ami interrupted quickly.

"I think I would enjoy that," Tiger agreed.

"Okay," Sailor Moon said simply.

"Oh, and Ami, speaking of responsibility... who else did you use that possession spell on?" Dr Mizuno asked, her voice full of motherly authority. "Should I be expecting more surprises?"

Ami shook her head and raised her hands, palms facing outward. "No, no, nothing like that ever happened before! I don't like using the spell on sentient beings at all, except as a lie detector. Well, I also need to use it on Cathy too sometimes so I can renew certain enchantments, but that takes only a moment and she agrees to it. I mainly use it on the imps and the ice golems, which are pretty much the same thing!"

"Ah, yes, those imps. I have been thinking about them. They are some kind of slave, aren't they?"

"Um." Ami felt uncomfortable about that line of questioning. "They are summoned spirits attached to an artificial body. "

"But they are forced to work for you without compensation?"

The blue-haired girl nodded mutely.

"Ami, that's the definition of slavery. Are you sure all of this," Mrs Mizuno made an encompassing gesture with her hand, "isn't getting

to you? Are you still doing the right thing?"

"Mother, they aren't people! I have been in their head!" Ami protested. "They are not much smarter than a dog, and evil and mischievous to boot! Wait, I'll show you!" She focused inward, searching for an example. Unfortunately, she didn't have to search for long. She held out her arm and reached through space for the culprit. "This one, for example." She lifted the startled imp by grabbing the back of the creature's coverall. "She was sneaking into rooms and stealing single socks from each pair, then hiding them."

With a squeak, the imp hid the incriminating woollen object in her hand behind her back.

"Too late. You are going to put all of them back where you found them," she ordered sternly and returned the bug-eyed creature to its original location.

"That doesn't sound like something that a being barely smarter than a monkey would be capable of," Dr Mizuno pointed out.

"That- um..." Ami was at a loss for words and blinked. Had she possessed one of them since she had developed the Metallia-based version? And if so, had she taken the time to make sure there was nothing different about them? "I recently started using a new version," she admitted after some time. "I didn't think to check if they were different. By all accounts, they are more vicious than the originals..." Ami felt like slapping herself. She shouldn't have needed her mother to point something like this out. Particularly not after one of the ice golems evolved into a magic-eating monstrosity. Were all of her imps now baby youma that could grow into something more? That would make the way she used them rather... well, it was not something a good person would do without reservations. "I- I'll have to look into it."

"Ami! Don't look so depressed! I'm not angry at you. I know you have too much to deal with, and mistakes happen, " her mother comforted her. "I just don't want you to forget who you are and turn into what you are pretending to be."

"Thanks, mum," the young Keeper said, the red glow in her eyes

almost fading for a moment.

"So, let's move on to lighter things," Mrs Mizuno suggested. "Tiger."

The youma looked up in wonder. "Yes?"

A mischievous grin played around the elder Mizuno's mouth. "Why don't you start doing the sacred duty of every older sibling?"

"What would that be?" the youma asked cautiously.

"Why, thoroughly mortifying their younger siblings by talking about all the embarrassing little things they have been up to!"

"MUM!" Ami shrieked. The grin that had appeared on Tiger's face didn't bode well for her.

Siblings

Originally on 2011-10-21T23:13:00

Mrs Mizuno's hands were shaking. Therefore, she took care to keep them hidden under the table, out of sight of the crystal ball. For Ami's sake, she had to appear as if she was taking things in stride. As she was still recovering from the surprises, she only half-listened to Tiger to chatter about Ami's exploits. Of course, she really *was* interested in every little thing that her missing daughter had been up to, but right now, she needed to come to terms with the changed situation. *I should prescribe myself some calming drugs for future conversations like this*, she pondered, keeping a small smile frozen on her face. Her poor darling was too young for many of the things she currently had to deal with. The doctor briefly closed her eyes. If she could take some burdens off Ami's shoulders by appearing as an island of stability, then she would do so. Suddenly, she felt another hand gently enveloping her shaking fingers and squeezing them reassuringly. Startled, she looked to her left.

Sailor Moon was looking at her with an understanding smile and nodded slightly in the doctor's direction when she met her eyes.

So far, Dr Mizuno had thought of the blonde as well-meaning, but not too quick on the uptake. However, the magical girl seemed to be much more perspective than she appeared. *Or is my expression that transparent?* The doctor quickly looked back at the crystal ball, worried that Ami had observed the exchange. Her fear proved unfounded. Ami wasn't paying attention to her, since she was much too busy alternating between hiding the bottom of her face with her fists and shooting glares at the youma.

Youma. No, Tiger. She needed to stop thinking of the being as a creature and start to think of her as adopted daughter. After all, there could be a very confused copy of Ami trapped in that body. Kami, this entire situation was so bizarre. She didn't even want to imagine the creative paperwork that would be required if - when - Ami made it back. All of this was taking some serious getting used

to. Mrs Mizuno's trail of thought was interrupted when her brain seized on some of Tiger's words in particular. "Wait, you got drunk?" Mrs Mizuno sounded almost relieved. While she didn't exactly approve of her daughter experimenting with alcohol consumption, it was such a mundane act that she latched onto it in desperation. No evil magic, empire-building, mythical monsters, cloned sisters, or horrible mutilations. Just a complication that any parent of a teenager could reasonably expect to face.

"It was a victory party," Ami hurried to explain. "I didn't intend to!"

The sheepish expression on her daughter's face convinced Mrs Mizuno about her sincerity. "Well. I hope the resulting hangover taught you a valuable lesson."

"Actually, she avoided that one," Tiger interjected. Sitting on her desk and letting her legs dangle off its edge, she smirked. "She was using conjured alcohol, so it disappeared from her system before she could suffer from any of its after-effects!"

Mrs Mizuno blinked and looked alarmed. "Ami, that can't be healthy!" she shouted as she leaned toward the crystal ball. "Liquid suddenly disappearing from cells that are already using it - I shudder to think what that does to a metabolism." Very sternly, she continued "Next time you want to get drunk, use a real drink! Doctor's order!"

Ami, Tiger, and even Sailor Moon turned to look at her with wide eyes and went silent.

Dr Mizuno paused, thought about what she had said, and started massaging her temples. That had not come out as she had intended. Why did there always have to be magic to make things more complicated? "I'm not suggesting that you should get drunk again, or that I approve," she added in a pained voice. "I don't. But there isn't really much I can do about it if you decide to anyway!" An instant later, she regretted her words when she saw tears glitter in the corners of Ami's crimson-glowing eyes.

"Mum, I- I'm not going to turn into some kind of delinquent! You can trust me!" the blue-haired girl protested.

"Ami, I didn't mean it like that!" Mrs Mizuno said, cursing the feeling of helplessness that had led her to blurt out that thoughtless statement. "I'm very proud of how you are handling yourself, and I'm sure you are doing the best you can! I just wish I could be over there to support you." She hesitated and turned to look at Sailor Moon, narrowing her eyes. "Can I? Is there a way for me to get to Ami? If she got there..."

The blonde blinked. "I don't really know." Uncertain, she looked at the crystal ball. "Ami?"

"Thanks for the offer, Mum, but if we had some magic like that, I'd use it to come home instead," she explained, sounding sad.

"Oh. Of course." Mrs Mizuno fell quiet as that glimmer of hope died.

Before the silence could get awkward, Sailor Moon pulled the scrying device closer to herself, curiosity glimmering in her blue eyes. "Hey, Tiger, you said Ami made some outfit-changing spell while inebriated? What does it do?"

Grateful for the change of topic, Dr Mizuno allowed herself a grin. "Actually, I was wondering that myself."

Her daughter's eyes widened, and she shuffled her feet. "Err, I would prefer not to demonstrate that. I would lose the irreplaceable set of clothes I'm currently wearing, and-"

"I'd be happy to demonstrate!" Tiger announced and slid off the desk.

Ami made a strangled noise. "Wait!" She lunged at the youma, but was too late. Brightly-burning flames forced her back as they snaked around Tiger's body.

In front of the crystal ball, Mrs Mizuno gasped. Didn't the fire hurt? She kept watching in horrified fascination as the flames looped around limbs and took on more rigid shapes. Mentally, she rushed through a list of first aid measures for burn wounds. When the fiery transformation effects faded away, she let out the breath she had been holding. What little there was of the costume left no doubt that

Tiger's skin remained healthy and unblemished.

The youma grinned widely and pirouetted on one leg to better show off every part of the daring outfit. Spiked pauldrons, chains, and metal greaves glittered in the lamplight as she completed her turn and raised her scythe over her head. She came to a stop in a wide-legged stance that was an obvious parody of Sailor Moon's poses.

"Oh, only that one," Sailor Moon said as she sat sunk back into her seat.

The lack of surprise and faint disappointment in Sailor Moon's voice indicated that the blonde had seen the ridiculous outfit before. Mrs. Mizuno's brow furrowed. Did her daughter run around in that skimpy thing frequently?

Ami looked as if she wanted the ground to swallow her. "I didn't design it! I only added the bra!" She waved her index finger at Tiger's chest area and shot her a venomous look.

"And I'm still wondering why you made it out of steel. It's not really comfortable that way," the youma commented. She looked back at the crystal ball. "Well, what do you think?"

"Well," Mrs Mizuno hesitated and looked at Ami's worried face. "It's certainly a unique look. I suppose it's not worse than a bikini," she delivered her verdict. Which, considering that Ami had definitely preferred modest one-piece swimsuits before, was not exactly reassuring.

"It's actually fairly tame for local fashion," Tiger allowed, perhaps sensing that she was making her adoptive mother uncomfortable. "It's certainly not going to tarnish Ami's reputation."

Mrs Mizuno couldn't quite read the dark look that Ami reacted with. Instead, she focused her attention on the outfit again. Something about it seemed familiar, and she suddenly realised where she had seen it before. It had been in Ami's wardrobe, lying folded up next to some leather items that had caused her sleepless nights worrying about her daughter growing up. Thinking of Ami's bedroom reminded the doctor of something she couldn't believe she had

forgotten due to all the excitement. "Ami, there's a tentacle monster in your room!"

"Err, that's Tserk. I forgot all about it."

"It's supposed to be in there?" Mrs Mizuno asked cautiously, not liking the possible implications.

"Not really," the blue-haired girl shook her head. "It clung to me when I teleported back to my room in a hurry, so it got dragged along. Since it witnessed something I don't want the other monsters to learn, I decided to just leave it there for the moment while I went to have a shower. But then I got distracted by a great idea and forgot," Ami admitted, wringing her hands in embarrassment. "I really need to figure out what to do about that," she muttered under her breath.

"Should I ask why it was clinging to you in the first place?" Mrs Mizuno focused on the part of the explanation that she found the most alarming.

"Oh, that? That was her fault!" Ami demonstrated that she had grasped the concept of blaming the sibling very quickly. Her eyes narrowed mischievously as she continued "She had it hold me down!"

"What? Explain!" The doctor focused her piercing stare on Tiger, who ducked her head. Mrs Mizuno found that the youma's widening eyes increased her resemblance to Ami even more.

"Not nice, little sister, not nice at all," she commented as she crossed her arms. "It's your own fault for not holding still for your medical treatment!"

Mrs Mizuno's gaze returned to Ami. "Treatment? Are you sick, Ami?" She couldn't help having doubts about any kind of cure that involved a tentacle monster. Even if magic really existed.

"Nothing like that," Ami hurried to assure her. "I only had some magical contamination removed. Unfortunately, the holy spell to do so feels unpleasant and triggers a flight reflex, due to my current

condition." She raised both hands to point at her glowing eyes. "I'm fine, mother," she added after a moment.

Mrs Mizuno let the sceptical expression on her face melt away. "I'll take your word for it." Magical Contamination. How did one even begin to accurately estimate the danger of something like that? As a medical doctor, it vexed her not to have any idea about the health risks involved. She felt completely out of the loop and didn't like it at all. Neither Ami nor Tiger seemed overly concerned, though. Perhaps she should just trust in their superior expertise?

"Did you really have to use a tentacle monster?" Sailor Moon asked, her lips quivering slightly with disgust.

"Better that it took the bruises than me!" Tiger said immediately. She mimed some punches and kicks. "Ami here wasn't exactly safe to hold onto!"

"Ami," Dr Mizuno interrupted in order to regain the initiative before more weirdness could put her off-balance. She retrieved a stack of several papers from underneath the table. "Let's talk about the patients you have to care for. I have compiled a list of step-by-step instructions on how to properly clean and bandage wounds in general so that you won't have to guess." She held up one of the sheets. "There's also a section on how to recognise the symptoms of infection and fever, and another on treating injuries in the eye region. I also included instructions for making concentrated alcohol to use as disinfectant, in case it works better on those cursed wounds than your magic." She arranged the sheets in a circle around the crystal ball so that Ami could see them.

"Thanks, Mother," Ami smiled warmly. "This may help those who can't use magic!"

A handful of imps stormed into the room, letting out short squeals. They pushed and jostled each other as they rushed toward the empty chair behind the desk. Still fighting over who would be first, they hopped onto the chair and from there on top of the desk. Two of the black-eyed creatures were slower than the others, but more adventurous. They headed for Tiger instead, clambering up her armoured greaves as they used her as an improvised, protesting

ladder.

"Hey! You little-" The youma quickly grabbed the chain around her waist that held up her loincloth when one of the imps used it as a handhold to pull herself up. "Get off me!" She whirled around to glower at the gaggle of servants leaving dusty footprints on the shiny, polished surface of her desk. "What are you even doing here?"

As if to answer her question, the imps sat down in a circle around the crystal ball, each one armed with a pen and a sheet of paper. Frowning and with their tongues poking out of the corners of their mouths, they started copying the instructions that Mrs. Mizuno had provided.

Tiger pointed her glower at a more deserving target. "You did that on purpose!" she accused her adopted sister.

Ami smiled innocently. "They know what I need done, not necessarily how I want it done," she explained.

Dr Mizuno stared at the scribbling imps, wondering once again just exactly how smart they were. "They can read, too?"

Her daughter shook her head. "No, they are simply copying what they see. Anyway, I have great news about the patients! We found a partial cure!" She gesticulated with her right hand in the air and snipped her fingers. "There. I just deactivated the anti-scrying spotlights in the dining area. Try focusing on the patient I showed you last time!"

Sailor Moon gulped and shut her eyes tight. "All right," she said in a small voice and touched the crystal ball.

Tiger's office faded from sight, to be replaced by a large hall where people sat at a long, wooden table. The viewpoint zoomed in on a man who was eating chicken broth from a wooden bowl. Like most of the other humans here, he was wearing a large piece of dyed cloth wrapped around himself in a toga-like fashion.

Mrs Mizuno barely noticed the strange garments. If she had, she

would have come to the correct conclusion that the patients' original clothes were intolerably smelly and unhygienic by now. Instead, she stood up from her seat and brought her face so close to the scrying device that her nose almost touched it. It was unbelievable. That man had eyes! They all had eyes! Complete regeneration! For a doctor like her, it was a dream come true. She tapped the crystal ball with a fingertip, focusing the point of view on her amazing daughter again. "Ami," she began, her voice very serious as she stared straight into the teenager's eyes. Carefully pronouncing every word, she continued "I insist that you teach me how to do that!"

"I'd love to," Ami said with a sheepish smile, "but sadly, I don't know how. I didn't cast the spell myself."

Sailor Moon cautiously opened one eye. When she spotted no raw-looking wounds, she opened the other too. "What did I miss?"

"Jadeite restored their eyes with a glamour," the blue-haired girl explained for both her and her mother's benefit. "It's a type of magic that escapes me so far," she admitted with a sigh.

"Jadeite! That creep managed can do something like that?" Sailor Moon blurted out, earning herself a reproachful frown from Ami.

"Yes. His magic is very versatile. " Ami explained.

"Do you think I could talk to him?" Mrs Mizuno requested. "Perhaps I have more luck than you. The possibility of being able to do that is worth at least a try!"

"You don't have access to the source of magical power that he's using," Ami dashed her mother's hopes.

Mrs Mizuno wasn't willing to give up that easily, though. She had caught a glimpse at the holy grail of medicine, and she wasn't going to just let it slip through her grasp. "Then how do I get access to it?" she asked in a no-nonsense kind of voice.

While the question surprised and startled Ami, Tiger was quick to answer. "Well, first you need to start worsh-"

"No!"

The youma went down under a swarm of imps that jumped off the desk and onto her back, tackling her to the ground. Several three-fingered hands covered her mouth.

"- mph!"

"No, no, no!" Ami continued and put her hands in front of herself, palms facing outward. "This is a terrible idea! He gets his power from serving a great evil, and you shouldn't even consider this, Mother!"

"But-"

"The cure isn't even permanent! " Ami continued, uncharacteristically raising her voice to cut off her mother's protest. "His spell is an illusion so powerful that it affects reality, but he needs to maintain it! If these poor people get too far away from him, they'll go blind again!"

Mrs Mizuno blinked and digested the news. That limited the usefulness of the technique somewhat.

"Call those stupid things off already!" Tiger demanded. She was clinging to the upper part of one of the crystal-topped pillars that lighted her office. Below her, the pack of imps circled the structure, and one of them took a swing at it with her pick.

Dr Mizuno heard Sailor moon giggle, and rolled her eyes. "Ami, stop it. Your sister could get hurt if she falls from that height," she ordered. If she was to consider the youma family, then she had best act like it. Her misgivings about all the weirdness were returning. Why couldn't her daughters fight like normal siblings?

"She can fly," the blue-haired girl muttered quietly, looking at the ground. Nevertheless, the servant creatures scuttled away. She cleared her throat. "Mother, do you know how long it takes for all the cells within eye tissue to be replaced with new cells?"

Dr Mizuno shook her head. "Sorry, that is not the kind of data I usually work with at the hospital. I'll ask some experts for you, but I'm not sure if studies on that topic even exist." It pained her to

disappoint Ami like that, in particular since it was a medical question, but she simply didn't know the answer. She was about to suggest dosing someone's eyes with an easily-detected, harmless magical marker and timing how long it took for the traces to disappear, but then thought better of it. The last thing she wanted to do was giving Ami the impression that it was all right to perform experiments on humans. Not that she didn't trust her daughter, but her current environment seemed to actively encourage quick and unethical solutions.

"Thank you," Ami smiled. "If you want to learn healing magic, I could let you photograph some of my spellbooks." She held out her hand, palm facing upward. An instant later, a large tome dropped into it. "This one isn't actually about healing, as I'm not sure if normal humans from our world can even can power spells on their own. Instead, the book describes techniques for collecting ambient mana to fuel one's magic with."

"Ami, I like the idea, but I can't read that language," Mrs Mizuno pointed out a slight flaw.

Tiger appeared at Ami's side. "Oh, but that's not a problem. You have a translator right there!" She pointed through the crystal ball at Sailor Moon.

"Huh?" The blonde looked up, noticed the size of the book and let out a whimper. "Now it's proven. You *are* evil!" she whined, pouting.

Let Them Eat Cake

Originally on 2011-11-04T22:31:00

The cylindrical cake loomed within a cage of scaffolding, reaching halfway up to the cave's ceiling. Its white icing glittered invitingly in the torchlight, which shone from the mouths and eyes of demon masks carved into the walls.

Several imps scuttled across the three distinct levels of the scaffolding, each of which corresponded to one tier of the vast confection. The wooden boards creaked underneath their feet as they dipped their brushes into bowls filled with liquid chocolate and painted fanged grimaces onto the cake's exterior.

Other imps hung suspended head-first from the cave ceiling and decorated the top of the confection with globs of whipped cream. It was slow work, since every move shifted their weight, making the chains they were suspended from swing and rattle.

In the back of the room, Mukrezar stood on the stone arch that formed the top of an enormous oven. The aroma escaping from its opening pleased his nose, and he didn't mind the heat warming up the damp cave either.

"Master, it appears that your visitors are getting impatient," his butler's voice whined to his right.

The pink-haired elf looked past where the cake rested on an oversized mine cart and quickly found the delegation in question. "Why, exactly, would I care?"

"Well, your Gluttonousness, you are missing some delightful expressions of irritation and longing. Take, for example, the bile demon to the left. Observe how his beady yellow eyes water as they stare at the delicious cake, so close and yet forbidden and unattainable. Relish the sight of him chewing his lower lip bloody in order to distract himself from his famished desire." The bearded imp moved his extended index finger to the right. "Witness his partner,

whose tongue is hanging down onto his bulbous, swollen belly! Enjoy the twitching of his facial muscles as his fear of you wars with his hunger!" The butler pointed at the third figure, covered entirely with black, angular armour. "Now, imagine the disgusting feeling of standing between those other two while their drool pools on the ground and your armour is not waterproof!"

Mukrezar took a closer look. "That *is* mildly amusing," he admitted. "However, that puddle is going to touch the tracks soon. I don't want them to rust."

The butler blinked and followed the steel tracks leading from the oven to the cake and further ahead with his eyes. "You could charge them for a replacement, Master!" he suggested.

Mukrezar smirked. "I think I'll make them go away instead." He disappeared from his perch. To his satisfaction, all three of his visitors visibly flinched when he appeared in the air before them, piercing them with his crimson gaze. "Speak. What do you want?"

"G-great Keeper Mukrezar," the dark knight began, his shaking voice sounding tinny through his helmet. We are the official delegation from-"

"Why aren't you kneeling yet?" the Keeper interrupted him with a sneer.

"Ah- of course. Please excuse our impertinence!" the knight said quickly. His knees hit the wet ground with a metallic splash.

To Mukrezar's great pleasure, the bile demons exchanged confused and dismayed looks. Without legs, they had obvious trouble following the implied command. In the end, they let themselves roll forward, prostrating themselves before him.

"I guess that will have to suffice," The red-eyed elf said in a long-suffering tone. He fell silent and let his visitors stay in their uncomfortable positions until he got bored. "Rise. Why does the city of Nightsewers send me three expendable envoys?"

"Well, this is about your recent purchases, your Greatness," the dark

knight began. His gauntlets made odd clinking noises as he wrung his hands.

"Oh? I hope, for your sake, that there is nothing wrong with them. I paid an exorbitant amount of gold, as you are obviously aware of."

"N-no! No, there's nothing wrong with the goods. Of course not. But, well, the price you offered was perhaps too high, and therefore-"

"You are here to return my money?" Mukrezar asked, just to be difficult. Making people squirm never got old.

"That- would be accurate if one looks at it from a certain angle. You see, your prices made our citizens a tiny bit too greedy, so nobody paid attention to what the others were doing, and now-"

"The granaries are empty? The larders contain only moths? Even the rats go hungry?" The butler asked in a singsong voice as he arrived and took up position behind his master. It earned him surprised looks and glares from the delegation.

"Shush. I'm sure that isn't the case, even if my purchases had somehow cleaned out the existing stocks. After all, they have enough gold now to resupply from their usual sources."

"Err, about that," the bile demon to the left growled, "our usual source would be Keeper Dantieu, whom you are currently besieging. Would you perhaps be willing to let us pass through the portal and..."

Mukrezar shot the fat creature a flat look that caused his hopeful words to get stuck in his throat, where they died with a croak.

"No, didn't think so, either," the demon said after a moment, shaking his head and rattling the morning stars attached to his horns.

"Nothing personal, but I'm afraid I'm unwilling to let anything or anyone through to my dear, former minion who cowardly neglected to assist his Master when he was stuck on the Avatar Islands with no gold." Mukrezar said with an insincere smile. "Operational security, you understand. You'll just have to raid the surface yourself, I'm afraid."

"Master, the troops of Keeper Jalnor applied scorched earth tactics here when the surfacer forces drove them back," the reproachful voice of the butler intruded. "I did include that detail in my report on his recent demise!"

"Indeed? What an unfortunate coincidence. I suppose that means you want to buy some of your food back?" he asked, addressing the delegation.

The knight nodded. He was probably grimacing underneath his helmet. "Warchief Molound has authorised me to pay what you paid for it and more, so-"

"No."

"But your Darkness, I haven't even-"

"Nope. I need it all for myself. Getting those cakes just right takes a huge amount of ingredients and experimentation, you know."

"But we need food too!" the left bile demon blurted out. His stomach growled, as if to underline the urgency of the request.

"Your lack of foresight is hardly *my* fault!" Mukrezar declared, waving one hand dismissively. His glowing eyes narrowed. "I didn't force you to sell." He hadn't needed to. Their greed had done that for him quite masterfully.

"Building your dungeon here in the Underworld is extremely irregular," the other bile demon tried a different angle, unable to tear his gaze away from the almost-finished cake. "The priests won't be happy if you turn against the Underworld and cause its denizens to starve!"

"When are they ever happy?" The elf asked rhetorically. He landed, crossed his hands behind his back and started walking up and down. "Now, don't you worry. What reason could I possibly have to turn against a city such as Nightsewers? Why, I have fond memories of its scummy pits and stinky fissures as source of the finest bile demons in the land!"

His two red-skinned visitors started smiling in polite confusion at the

compliment.

"Of course, that was a while back," Mukrezar continued. "Now what were we talking about? Ah, right, imminent starvation. Oh, yes, I'm intimately familiar with starvation. Personally. Very sad story. Here I am, having destroyed the Champion of the Light. My power is unmatched, my forces are innumerable, and the Avatar Islands have been stripped bare to build up my unstoppable armies. My forces are ready to pour forth into the rest of the world and make it mine! Except," his expression darkened, "I find out that all portals leading out of my domain have been mysteriously blocked from the outside. At the same time."

In sharp contrast to the Keeper's expression, his voice remained cheerful. It only got a bit louder when the rattling of the knight shaking in his armour threatened to drown it out.

"Mysterious. And synchronous. Mysteriously synchronous. Now, do you know who has both the necessary maps to do this, and also the means to reach those portals?" Mukrezar stopped pacing and whirled around to stare at his guests. "If you guessed 'the Underworld cities' - then you guessed *right*!" His eyebrows crept up into his pink mane as he wriggled them. "A suspicious mind would be forced to draw certain conclusions."

The bile demons, being somewhat slower on the uptake than their metal-clad companion, started paling all over their rounded bodies.

"But never mind that some envious, terrified worms have treacherously ruined my bid for world domination. I'm not bitter!" He leaned in closer. "I'm not bitter at all, because I know the story will have a happy end. For me, that is. For them... well, let's just say that the end will be suitable terrible and leave it at that. It's a cheerful thought, isn't it?"

His guests didn't seem inclined to agree. They were all trying to hide behind each other while also attempting to appear as if they weren't moving at all. As a result, the whole group was slowly inching in the general direction of the exit. The sickly smiles on their faces trembled the more Mukrezar's grin widened.

"I'm afraid I won't be selling you any food. Unless..." he made a show of looking thoughtful. "Well, I'm not an unreasonable man. Pragmatism can sometimes make me forget transgressions that I would be otherwise be disinclined to overlook," he said. "If a city would, for example, recognise me as its complete and absolute ruler, it would make itself indispensable enough for me to consider lending some aid."

"Now wait just a moment!" The bile demon to the right snorted, having somehow recovered his courage. He pulled himself straight, the muscles in his arm bulging underneath his leathery skin. "This is outrageous! You can't do this! The protection pacts between cities will kick in, and then you are finished!"

"Only if I actually attacked you," Mukrezar looked at his fingernails, bored. "If some city was to request my protection on its own, however, there would be absolutely no reason for the others to intervene."

The other bile demon, perhaps emboldened by the fact that nothing horrible had happened to his companion, crossed his arms. "As if that would ever happen."

"Is that so? Well, I guess I'll just be over here then, eating cake." Mukrezar turned his back to the delegation to admire the object in question. "By the way, you have heard that the Avatar was seen in the Underworld recently, right?"

"What does that have to do with anything?" the knight asked, his voice uncertain.

"I'm sure it's of no concern to you. It hardly ever happens. He only does that when he's looking for something."

"Such as you, Master?" Mukrezar's servant piped up.

The Keeper's face brightened. "Why, yes, I believe you may be right." He turned to smile straight at the knight. "How unfortunate for you that your city seems to be blocking the way to my dungeon."

"Err, um, w-we could just let him pass?"

"Priests." Mukrezar said. More wasn't required to point out the stupidity of that suggestion.

The other man's shoulders slumped in defeat. "I- right. We will inform the warlord of your dema-"

"Generous offer," Mukrezar corrected.

"-of your generous offer. By your leave, your Darkness?"

Mukrezar nodded once, regally. "I am glad you are seeing things my way now. Oh, and would you like some cake?" With one hand, he indicated the well-decorated towering mass behind him.

The bile demons stopped bowing and looked at him with wide eyes. "Seriously?"

"Would I have made the offer if I didn't mean it? Enjoy."

After a moment of stunned disbelief, the voracious demons stormed forwards with eager expressions on their wide-mouthed faces and more bounce than usual in their hops.

"It may very well be your last meal," the butler giggled, rubbing his hands.

The bile demons froze and turned around to stare at him with wide eyes.

"Since your city is out of food and all that," Mukrezar explained calmly. "No, really, go ahead."

More hesitantly than before, the demons dragged themselves forward.

"It's not like it's poisoned or anything," the imp added helpfully.

The rotund demons stopped again and exchanged nervous looks.

"Come on now. It's not going to kill you."

The braver of the two demons slowly extended an arm toward the

heavenly-smelling wall of sugary goodness.

"Quickly." The suit-wearing imp added in a stage whisper.

The arm froze.

"I baked it myself. My culinary skills are held in high esteem," Mukrezar added, crossing his arms.

"Especially in the torture chambaarghh!" Lifted by an unseen force, the butler hurtled through the air in a high arc that carried him over the cake and out of sight. An instant later, a thud followed by sizzling noises came from the direction of the oven, accompanied by more pained screams.

"Well?" Mukrezar raised an eyebrow at the bile demon whose extended arm still hadn't touched the cake.

"Actually, I-I'm not r-really hungry," the first bile demon said, slowly lowering the limb.

"Y-yeah, me neither," the second agreed. "Thank you for the offer, but we should really get going now!"

Slowly, but getting faster and faster as they got closer to the exit, the two fled. Their knightly companion was nowhere in sight.

Mukrezar stood in silence as he watched them leave. As the regular thumping noises of their hops grew fainter in the distance, he shook his head. "Imagine that. Bile demons declining an offer of food." He shrugged his shoulders, and a tablet with a large piece of cake appeared before him. "Weird." Layers of various colours glittered moistly as he raised the slice to his mouth and took a big bite. His chewing motions gradually slowed until they ceased completely, and tiny tears started glittering at the corner's of the Keeper's red-glowing eyes.

"Oh, Master," the sooty form of his butler said as he came walking around the cake-bearing platform. He patted his beard to extinguish some smouldering hairs and shook his head sadly when he saw the elf's pained expression. "You never learn."

Side by side, Ami and her new sister walked toward the young Keeper's study, casting long shadows on the engraved corridor walls. The outline of a sailor collar, ribbons, and a tiny skirt broke up the shorter silhouette sliding across the white stone. The taller shadow, however, was a disturbingly accurate representation of the female form.

"The part about me being drunk was bad enough! You didn't have to demonstrate, too!" Ami complained.

"Just be glad I didn't show off the original version." Tiger snickered. "That would have been a laugh!"

Ami felt mortified even thinking about that possibility. "I had nothing to do with that one! And change back to normal already!"

Tiger continued on as if she hadn't heard her. "Or I could have mentioned the leather, and the reason for it. What would mother think if she knew you had a spell like that?"

"It was for science! I had to *verify*!" Ami insisted, raising her voice. Inwardly, she wondered if it would be terribly immature of her if Tiger suddenly found herself taking a bath in the ocean outside. She was already dressed for the occasion, after all.

"Not going to fly. I got your memories, remember?" Tiger grinned and tapped her forehead with her index finger.

Ami hung her head, recognising an argument she couldn't win.

"Then there's your little crush on Jadeite, of course," Tiger continued, causing Ami to clench her teeth. "Maybe if you dressed like this more often," she rapped her knuckles against her metal bra, making soft pinging noises, "you'd have an easier time catching his eye. Though I suppose the unmodified variant would be even more-"

"Stop it!" Ami shouted, hiding her mouth behind her fists. Underneath her fingers, she could feel her cheeks heat up. The worst part was that the suggestion mirrored trains of thought that had gone through her mind in some unguarded moments. Her lack

of progress with Jadeite was becoming rather frustrating. Fortunately, she was saved from having to continue the awkward conversation when the door to a side passage flew open with a bang.

"Mercury! There you are!" Cathy stormed in, a deep frown on her face. "I need your help!"

Ami stopped walking and looked up at the tall woman with surprise. "Has something happened, Cathy?" She started preparing herself mentally to hear about the latest catastrophe.

"Those warlocks are driving me crazy!"

"The ones from your experiment?" Ami asked, wondering where this was going.

"Experiment?" Tiger asked, drawing the blonde's attention to herself.

The swordswoman raised an eyebrow when she noticed the striped youma's attire, but didn't react otherwise. "We are testing whether or not an increase in physical fitness entails a corresponding increase in magical power," she explained.

Tiger blinked and then laughed. "In other words, you are forcing those scrawny nerds get some exercise?"

"Yes! Or at least, that's what I would be doing if I could actually find those sneaky bastards!" She let out a growl of frustration and threw her hands up in the air. "I can't even get them to finish a single lap before all of them have turned invisible and run off to who-knows-where!" She glared at Tiger, who had started snickering. "It's not funny!"

Ami smiled, relieved that nothing worse was going on. "I believe I will be able to locate them for you, she said. Focusing inward, she requested the location of her magic users from the dungeon heart. "Ah, over there." Her crimson eyes flew open wide in alarm. "What are they *doing*?"

Staff Difficulties

Originally on 2011-11-11T16:31:00

Three arguing warlocks stood around a waist-high pedestal covered in schematics. One kept tapping the blackboard behind him with his index finger, smearing the scrawled runes on it in the process. The other held up an open book like a ward against ignorance, pointing at a certain passage. While the two shouted at each other, the third covered his forehead with one palm while glaring at the wax dripping onto his notes from a toppled candelabra.

Undisturbed by the heated argument taking place behind a spell of silence, other dark magicians continued with their own work. Some leaned over instruments made of lenses, twisted wires, and glass to examine glowing sparks trapped within, others carved wards or took notes. The largest group had gathered in a half-circle at the centre of the room, their backs forming a wall of mismatched robes in all colours of the rainbow.

All work came to a sudden stop when a flash of icy blue lit up the chamber, reflecting off the scorch-marked steel plates that covered one wall of the laboratory.

A short, blue-haired figure stepped out of a swirl of snowflakes, her crimson eyes narrowed into blazing slits."Torian! What is the meaning of this?"

Startled, the black-bearded warlock winced and whirled around to look at Ami. His panicked expression disappeared behind a smile so quickly that it was hardly noticeable, and he bowed deeply. "Your Imperial Highness, what a honour to-"

"I had given you explicit orders not to bring that thing into my dungeon!" Ami accused, pointing at the three-pronged staff of spiralling bone that stood in the centre of the room, its bottom end jabbed into a block of rock. She was angry and she didn't bother to hide it.

Torian suddenly found himself alone as the other warlocks scattered like a flock of frightened chickens. "Well, err, please forgive me if I may sound insolent, but I did not go against your orders," he defended himself. Beads of sweat were glittering on his pale forehead. "It is not the same staff!"

Ami kept staring at him. In her opinion, that didn't change the situation much, even if it should be true. Until proven otherwise, she would assume that battle staves of Calarine were dangerous. However, she wasn't only worried about Crowned Death being able to use the artefact to inflict harm on her or her dungeon. Torian had also blatantly circumvented the spirit of her rules while adhering to their words. The creatures under her command starting to challenge her authority was a nightmare scenario. It would force her to re-establish discipline through measures that she couldn't condone. She still lacked the means to implement her plan for dealing with a situation like that in a more gentle way.

"It's the truth!" Torian continued, apparently feeling the need to fill the silence and justify himself. "We *all*" he spared a short glare at the other warlocks, who were attempting to look as if they had never met him, "found it when we investigated your wondrous air-faring vessels. It was not far from where you had struck down the death priest who dared board your flagship!"

Ami was fairly certain it hadn't been there when she remodelled the dirigible so that it could carry more patients, and wasn't reassured at all. "If you were so confident that you were doing nothing wrong, then why did you remodel this room into a laboratory without telling me about it?" she asked.

"That was his idea!" Torian squeaked, pointing at a warlock whose violet robes strained at the waist. "He started it as a hideout from Commander Cathy, in order to evade her thinly-disguised torture sessions and still get some work done! We simply took advantage of the additional space!" He wiped the sweat from his brow and looked at Ami, his face pale.

"I am not happy with this at all." Ami crossed her arms and glowered at the Calarine staff, as if the force of her disapproval could make it go away. She thrust her black-gloved palms toward the artefact.

"Shabon. Spray. Freezing," she intoned slowly, giving her magic time to supply the needs of the technique.

Cheerful squeals echoed through the room as a blast of aquamarine light and bubbles shot toward the staff and encased it within a thick shell of ice.

Surprised, Ami turned her head and spotted three tied-up imps lying in the corner of the room. She hadn't even noticed them before, and scowled.

"Your Majesty, please don't!" Torian threw himself between her and the artefact and fell to his knees. "We were making progress! Fascinating progress! Nothing bad has happened any time we used it! Please have a look at the results before doing anything rash!"

Against her better judgement, Ami hesitated, her curiosity getting the better of her. What exactly were they making progress with?

Torian took the continued presence of the ice-covered staff as encouragement and jumped to his feet. "It's really quite fascinating, your Majesty," he began eagerly. "The capacity of the staff to enhance spells seems to be unrelated to its user's capability." With quick, determined steps he strode over the warding symbols inscribed in circles around the staff and touched the metal-reinforced back wall. His fingers stroked over a scorched depression that had been melted into the surface. "An imp did this."

Ami considered the threads of formerly molten metal running down from the impact point like tear tracks, and made a brief mental calculation. No imp should have enough power to spare for a spell like that, meaning that the suspicious artefact would have contributed most of it. Alarmed, she activated her visor to scan for possible contamination with Crowned Death's energies. "That would contradict the established lore that the staff helps experts more than beginners," she said thoughtfully.

"Well, some apprentice wouldn't have the skill or concentration to cast spells that require all that much power. Besides, I assume that there is some sort of mental block. They lack the experience to really understand the force at their fingertips, and therefore fail to

use it. Additionally, there is a slight risk involved with using the staff." He walked toward one of the imps and started unchaining her, more confident now. "Allow me to demonstrate."

"You want to show me why the artefact is dangerous?" Ami's face reflected her doubt and reluctance.

"Yes, my Empress. The experiment itself should be perfectly safe, even more so now that you and your incomparable skills are here, your Majesty. There is no reason to worry. We have done this experiment before," Torian hurried to reassure her. "It only involves a lighting and a firespark spell, nothing stronger. If your Majesty would be so kind to release the staff from its block of ice?"

"Why don't you just tell me first?" Ami asked when she saw how much the imp struggled against being pulled toward the glittering block.

"But-" Momentarily distracted by Ami's question, Torian gave the imp the opening she needed to chomp down hard on his hand. With a pained yelp, he let go and reflexively pulled the hand upwards. When he looked at it, a half-moon shaped imprint of uneven teeth marred its back. He glared at the creature who had sought shelter behind empress Mercury's legs and was making rude gestures at him. Straightening, he pulled down his gold-trimmed sleeves as he attempted to recover his dignity. "As always, you are of course right, my Empress. Especially in light of current *technical difficulties*." He frowned when a mocking snicker came from the imp's direction. "Very well. First, I would have made that nasty little good-for-nothing hold the battle staff of Calarine and cast a lighting spell."

"Wait, you managed to teach the imp a spell?" Ami asked, looking down at the helmeted servant capering behind her.

"It was a tedious process, unpleasant for everyone involved and not worth the effort, I assure you," Torian explained, provoking a general mutter of agreement from the various other warlocks in the room. "As I was saying, I would have made it cast a lighting spell, which even an imp with its meagre reserves could manage once or twice without the staff. Then, I would have made it throw a firespark at the target," he pointed with his thumb over his shoulder, indicating the

metal-clad wall. "Normally impossible for such a pathetic and ugly creature."

The imp let out an angry squeal and thrust her hand forward, pointing the middle of her three fingers at the unimpressed warlock. With a hiss, a greyish cloud of sulphurous smoke rose from the digit. Wobbling and panting, the coverall-clad minion stared at her fingertip, which had done nothing more than turn sooty.

"And that is pretty much the expected result without an amplifier," Torian explained, grinning smugly at the black-eyed being. "With the staff, however, the spell would have succeeded, and succeeded very well indeed. If questioned about the difference in energy drain between the two spells, the imp would have been unable to tell which one required more. The battle staff makes casting it just that easy. Now, consider this." Torian fished out an amulet from his deep pockets and held it up for Ami to see.

She immediately recognised the ward inlaid into the silver disc, since she had been forced to wear a similar piece of jewellery some time ago. The design stopped spellcasting by sucking the mana out of its wearer and dispersing it.

"In the next phase of the experiment, I would have put this ward on the imp and asked it to cast the lighting spell again. The result would have been a working spell, a bright flash, this," he produced a dirty, glittering clump that Ami identified with some trouble as a molten amulet, "and a dead imp."

"You have been killing my imps in your experiments?" Ami gasped, horrified. Just when she had decided to treat them better, too! No wonder the tired creature sitting at her side had been terrified.

Torian made a dismissive gesture with his hand and quickly continued "The *important* thing," he pointed at the frozen staff, "is that this weapon compensates for the caster's limits. Enough to overcome the drain of the ward. Enough to get the spell done. No strain, no traps, no effort. No *safeties*. It will gleefully provide more magical energy than its user can handle. The imp would have been dead even before the slagged amulet burned itself through its flesh!"

Wincing at the mental picture, the blue-haired girl snapped "You should have cleared all of this with me before you tried it!"

"Your Imperial Majesty, please hear me out! I have not even gotten to the most interesting part yet!" Torian replied. "The artefact does something the moment its user dies!"

"So it *is* a trap!" Ami decided. With a wave of her hand, both ice block and weapon trapped within disappeared, causing Torian to groan. "What exactly does it do?"

The warlock's confident expression wavered slightly. "Well, we were still trying to research this, so we aren't sure yet. What we observed was actually very weak, almost as if the effect aborted before it could really get started. It's really hard to tell from the limited datam but we believe that it may be the beginning of a necromantic spell of some sort."

Ami could believe that. This was a tool of Crowned Death's servants, after all. She wouldn't be surprised if it could raise the dead body holding the staff as an undead creature. "What did you do with the imps' corpses?"

"Incinerated them. We weren't going to take any risks," Torian said.

"Aside from conducting this research without my knowledge," Ami reminded him. Her thoughts still circled about what she had just learned. The staff wasn't trapped *as such.* It simply worked too well in some cases. This should get it through the security checks of anyone who acquired it, and it was normally only dangerous to spellcasters who were already powerful to begin with. Combine this with some kind of selective necromantic effect... It wasn't difficult for the young Keeper to imagine a scenario in which one of these artefacts was "lost" and ended up in the hands of a wizard powerful enough to kill himself with it, only to end up an undead puppet. The battle staves of Calarine were recruitment devices!

"...wouldn't have thought of it if the stupid thing hadn't stumbled and stepped on the warding circle delimiting the testing area." Ami's chief warlock had apparently continued his report on the research approach while she had been thinking.

"I think I will have to do a few tests of my own," the teenage empress decided. At this point, the battle staff had been used several times within her dungeon, so if something bad was going to happen, it already had. She had no excuse not to scan the thing while it went active.

Torian clapped his hands and smiled. "I am so glad that you changed your mind. Now that your Majesty is here, we can use better test subjects and-"

"Please shut up," Ami said coldly. Better test subjects! It was a good thing she had discovered this operation when she had.

Torian flinched away from her menacing scowl and ducked his head deeper into the shelter of his high collar, not unlike a turtle withdrawing into its shell.

"For further reference," Ami elaborated in a voice like ice, "You will not use *any* living subjects in your experiments without clearing it with me first!" She let her gaze wander over the assembled warlocks. "That concerns all of you, as well as any of your colleagues who are not currently here, or who I may hire in the future. No exceptions! Is that understood?"

"Yes, your Majesty," the chorus of cowed warlocks answered her.

Ami took a few calming breaths while the magic users watched her in silence, looking both puzzled and intimidated. "Now then, I have a test to conduct." The hardened line of her mouth relaxed into a reassuring smile as she looked at the imp at her feet.

The creature let out a frightened whine as she instantly understood what the young Keeper wanted from her.

"Don't worry, there won't be any amulets involved," Ami told her.

Not reassured, the imp hung her shoulders and shuffled to the position that Torian had attempted to drag her towards earlier, looking back over her shoulder several times. Once she stood in the centre of the chalk-marked circle on the ground, she raised her arms into the air to catch the staff with her upwards-turned hands. Her fist-

sized eyes went even wider when instead, a block of ice appeared in the air a few steps to her left, crashed to the ground, and shattered. Muttering, she moved to pick the spiralling bone staff out of the heap of ice shards. The child-sized creature almost fell over as she levelled the weapon and swung it in Torian's direction.

The chief warlock quickly darted behind one of the telescope-like instruments pointed directly at the chalk circle.

"None of that," Ami chided. Her field of vision was already tinted bluish by the visor covering her eyes, and she pulled out her computer to fine-tune the settings of her sensors. "Now, let's have a closer look at this. The lighting spell, please."

The imp stopped grimacing at Torian and thrust the staff high in the air. A sickly green orb appeared over its three prongs, outshining the candles arranged haphazardly around the room.

On the Mercury computer's display, the battle staff of Calarine lit up like a sun, and she hurriedly tuned down the sensitivity of her sensors. With new respect for the amount of energy stored in the deceptively slender weapon, she almost instinctively weaved a shield spell around herself. All around the room, she heard the warlocks hurriedly take cover or edge away further.

The imp simply looked at her with a resigned expression.

"Please repeat the spell," Ami encouraged as she concentrated on the readout.

This time, she could make out the complex patterns travelling through the carved bone spirals. There, that had to be the spell conducted through the staff. Here, energy flowing into the imp. There were many other things going on at each end, which she assumed was the power contained within the artefact being harmonised with that of its wielder. Very complex. One of those patterns could be a diagnostics spell, perhaps. Ami blinked when she spotted one particular variable. "Again, please?"

Another green flash. As before, there was a bright pulse around the staff, followed by energy travelling up and down, followed by

sparkles at both ends of the weapon's layers.

Ami frowned. "Again."

Flash. Pulse. Flowing magic.

"Again!"

Another green flash. No difference in the readout.

Ami started typing furiously, brows furrowed in concentration. Sure, the amount of mana contained within the staff was large and the needs of the lighting spell were low, but she should have been able to detect a small degree of depletion. Instead, any fluctuations in the staff's contents were well below the margin of error of her equipment. In other words, it was refilling its reservoir from somewhere, which was alarming. Now, how did this happen? "Firespark the metal wall," she instructed, deep in thought.

The imp complied and pointed the weapon at the indicated target. A small dart of flame smashed into the metal and detonated, causing a gong-like sound. The room became noticeably warmer as tiny rivulets of molten metal pooled on the ground.

Ami glared at her display. Aside from a brighter initial pulse, nothing had changed. The battle staff of Calarine remained fully charged, despite the undoubtedly greater expenditure. "The light again. Try to make it weaker." The recharge had to take place during the initial pulse that prevented her sensors from getting a proper look.

Flash.

"Again, please. Weaker." The sensors had almost been able to see through the glare this time. "Almost there. Once more, weaker still."

This time, the glowing orb produced by the imp was barely stronger than that of an anaemic firefly.

"Good!" Ami's heart rate quickened as data flitted across her screen. That had almost looked like a tiny Underworld portal flickering into existence within the bone shaft, persisting for only an instant. She replayed the recording in slow motion. No, not a real portal, though

the effect had properties of one. "Two more times, please."

The fascinating patterns repeated exactly the same as they had before and left Ami none the wiser.

She looked at the imp, and suddenly her face brightened. Turning her head, she focused on an empty spot in the room. "I wonder..."

From one moment to the other, an imp filled the previously empty spot, appearing in the air halfway through a somersault. She landed on her feet, rested her pick on her shoulders, and looked at Ami with large, questioning black orbs.

"Yes!" Ami cheered as her computer indicated a match. "So that's what an incoming teleport looks like!" Her good mood faded as quickly as it had come. The battle staff of Calarine being able to serve as some kind of teleport beacon made her wish to get rid of it at once. Unfortunately, she had to find out something else first. "Move ten steps to the left and do the weak glowing spell again. Then move ten forward and repeat," she instructed the imp.

The small being shrugged and waddled forward, taking the opportunity to whack one of the warlocks with her staff as she passed him.

Observing the inner workings of the active artefact again, Ami nodded softly to herself. Triangulation was possible, but not particularly accurate due to the minuscule differences she could observe after filtering out interferences and irrelevant data. Nevertheless, it should suffice. She closed her computer with a snap and looked at the warlocks, who were watching her in awe.

The imp squeaked in surprise when a huge hand made of water and ice appeared before her, ripped the battle staff from her grasp, and disappeared.

"I have ascertained that this type of weapon is too dangerous to leave within the dungeon," Ami began, prompting sighs and disappointed groans from her audience. "Silence!" Having to play the stern tyrant didn't sit well with the teenager, but if it prevented her having to take much more unpleasant measures later, she was

willing to give it a try.

Not one sound came from the assembled magicians as they waited for her next words.

Focusing inward, Ami moved a world map from elsewhere in the dungeon into her grasp. She unrolled it and marked an ocean area with a circle. "I have discerned that the staff is powered remotely from somewhere within this region. I want you to survey the area and find out from where exactly!"

"It will be done, your Majesty," Torian said. He bowed and stepped forward to take the proffered map. "Locating something underwater will be difficult," he cautioned.

"Nevertheless, I want the origin of the effect found. Oh, and Torian? I am deducing the gold cost of the imps you used from your pay."

The warlock flinched. "Your Imperial Majesty, I would never question the wisdom behind your decisions, but I must point out that I was not the only one to decide on this course of action. Certainly, the others-"

"You are the chief warlock," Ami interrupted him. From the occasional grumbling around the room, she concluded that his colleagues hadn't received his objection any better than she had. "As such, you are responsible for keeping the others in line. You failed at this."

"Very well, your Majesty." Torian sounded pained, and his well-groomed beard quivered as if he was chewing on something.

"In addition, all of you will attend Cathy's training sessions from now on until further notice. Unauthorised absences will have to be explained to me personally. I will not be pleased about having to take time out of my busy schedule to deal with something like that." The young Keeper made sure to meet the eyes of each of the robed magic users as she slowly turned in a circle.

The crowd's browbeaten response of "Yes, your Majesty!" was intermingled with groans and sighs.

"That is all. She should currently be waiting for you in the training room. Get moving."

The dark wizards shuffled toward the exit with all the speed and enthusiasm of a snail heading into a salt plain.

Ami watched the sad procession, her expression going darker and darker when the magicians invented different reasons to stall, such as properly turning off delicate apparatuses, making sure that chemicals were safely stored in their containers, and finding important notes they had dropped somewhere. After more than three minutes of this blatant testing of her tolerance, she had enough. She turned toward the imp with a mischievous smile and asked "I get the impression that those guys are not moving very quickly."

The startled imp blinked at her, then at the group of warlocks, and nodded. Her disdainful hiss was clearly audible in the sudden, tense silence.

"Do you think they would move faster with the reaper chasing them?"

The imp squealed gleefully and hopped up and down, nodding so hard that it almost made Ami dizzy. Thus, she instead watched the group of warlocks stampeding towards the exit, cursing each other as they shoved and pushed to get through the doorway first.

Ami, wearing her best set of gold-trimmed Keeper garb, was chanting the spell that could summon one being over a long distance to her side. The echo accompanying her words wasn't caused by any kind of mystical effect and merely a consequence of the room being high and almost empty. Not even a sound-absorbing carpet covered the aquamarine floor tiles, which made sense when one considered the circle of blue flame burning on the polished floor. Only a few benches placed symmetrically along the left and right wall broke up the monotony of the place. While its emptiness had a certain simple elegance, Ami nevertheless wondered if she shouldn't be investing in some potted plants.

"Careful, Mercury!" Snyder' voice came from the left, alerting her to the fact that the summoning circle was wavering.

The teenager, her blue hair waving in the wind emanating from the fiery diagram, chided herself for letting her mind wander, and redoubled her concentration on the spell. Normally, she would have made three warlocks cast it, but she had to do it herself this time for the purpose of secrecy. Only Snyder, Jadeite, Cathy, and Tiger were present, since they would remain unsurprised by the arrival of an abbot in good standing with the Light. She would have included Jered too in the group she had assembled here to welcome the holy man, but he was away on a mission.

Tiger, who had changed into a black dress, let out a bored sigh and said "You know what I have been wondering, Snyder?" she cupped her chin in her hand and rolled her eyes upward, putting on a pensive expression. "What's the correct title for the sister of an Empress, anyway? Princess?"

"Well, yes, that would historically be the most common approach," the redhead confirmed, glancing sideways to see if the chatter wasn't disturbing Mercury.

"That means *you*," the youma thrust her index finger at Jadeite triumphantly, "have to call me 'Highness' now!"

The dark general furrowed his brow. "What? You've got to be kidding me."

Tiger shook her head. "Last time I checked, a princess was higher than a general!" She rubbed her hands. "That means I outrank you now, and there's nothing you can do about it!"

Jadeite's fingers twitched at his side. He turned on his heel and crossed his arms as he resumed staring at the fiery circle on the ground.

"Sure he can." Cathy lounged on one of the benches, and pretended to inspect her fingernails. Certain that she had the full attention of both the dark general and the youma, she grinned. "He could just marry the Empress."

Ami made a choked noise, and the circle of fire before her flared up high before collapsing. "Oh no!" Covering her bright red cheeks with her hands, she watched the floating symbols wink out of existence and the counter-rotating rings of flame go out. What would the abbot waiting at the other end of the connection think, seeing the spell being botched like that? What a way to make a first impression. This was almost as embarrassing as the swordswoman's comment. "Cathy! Don't distract me like that!" Mortified, she prepared to start anew.

A New Arrival

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The pillar of blue flame around Abbot Durval fell away like a sheet of water, granting him a first glimpse at his new environment. It was hot and bright, contrary to what he had come to expect from the typical dark and damp dungeon. His heart started beating faster when he took in the five figures standing in a row before him, and his grip on his wooden staff tightened. He could only make out their dark silhouettes against the white backdrop, because spots were dancing in front of his eyes from the brightness of the harmless fire he had been immersed in. He thought himself lucky that nothing worse had happened, giving that the obviously inexperienced caster had needed two attempts to get the spell right.

"Welcome to my realm, Abbot Durval," the central and shortest figure greeted him.

Durval hadn't expected to come face to face with the dark empress so soon, and he suppressed the reflex to take a step back. By now, he was able to discern the bright red glow in her eyes. "Empress Mercury." He inclined his head. Empress or not, he was not going to kneel before a Keeper. An insane act of defiance, perhaps, but he had lived a long life resisting and defying Keepers, and he wasn't going to stop in his old age. To his relief, Mercury did not seem to take offence. He inspected the girl in front of him closer. Aside from her uniform and the much brighter glow in her eyes, she didn't look much different from when she had infiltrated the force assaulting Arachne's dungeon. She seemed perhaps a bit paler and a fitter than before, too. He hadn't been able to get a good enough look at her back then to tell whether or not she had grown in the meantime. The continued presence of her old tiara on her forehead puzzled him. If she had gone through all that effort to seize the title of Empress, then why wasn't she wearing the proper regalia?

"This is general Jadeite," Mercury introduced the curly-haired man standing to her right, interrupting his musings.

"We have met," Durval said neutrally. He'd be hard-pressed to forget the warlock who had single-handedly kidnapped Baron Leopold. The experience may have been colouring the abbot's perceptions, but to him, the man in the strange uniform seemed more dangerous than the empress herself. In comparison, the blonde woman standing to the blue-haired girl's left didn't quite manage to instil the same uneasiness, despite being taller than Jadeite and clad in a menacing suit of black armour. It took the abbot a moment to recognise her as the unremarkable mercenary who had been accompanying Mercury. If not for the vertical scar on her right cheek, he might not have remembered her at all.

"Cathy, the commander of my local troops," the empress introduced the swordswoman, who smiled briefly in the abbot's direction. "Perhaps you still remember Snyder too?"

Durval spared a glance in the direction of the portly man in red and white robes. "Acolyte Snyder," he greeted him, not bothering to hide his sneer. "I hope you have served the Empress just as well as you have served your instructors."

The short redhead winced at that, and the awkward smile on his face wavered.

"Oh, his skills have grown to be almost half as good as his opinion of them," commented the being about whom the holy man was most curious. She strongly resembled Mercury, but was taller, curvier, and more muscular than the teenage Keeper. Tiny horns and black stripes on her skin identified her as a creature with some kind of demonic origin.

"And finally, my sister Tiger," the empress finished her introduction, with perhaps a hint of exasperation in her voice.

"Sister?" Inwardly, Durval groaned. *Light, there's another one. So much for Dumat's summoning plan.*

"Is the resemblance so hard to see?" A distortion that reminded him of heat haze surrounded the creature for an instant, and then all traces of her inhuman heritage were gone. The abbot blinked in surprise at the woman, who now looked like Mercury's older twin.

His gaze went back to the young empress. *Hmm. Maybe I was wrong about the chances of the summoning plan, after all.*

"I'm really happy you agreed to come here," Mercury said, still smiling. "I assure you that you have nothing to fear from me."

"I'm glad to hear that," Durval said drily. Since the girl had been speaking the truth, as far as he could detect it, he felt rather relieved. Now he'd at least be able to rest easily at night, provided the headache he'd get from using the Judge's Eye gift would let him.

"I will have some imps take your luggage to your quarters, if that is all right with you," Empress Mercury continued, pointing at the large bag resting near the old man's feet. "Your will be lodged in the embassy building until I officially turn it over to the Shining Concord Empire."

"You call that a building?" Tiger mocked. "I call it a glorified construction site!"

"A few rooms are habitable," the dark empress replied. "Ambassador Camilla has not complained yet. You may even run into her, Abbot. She is easily recognisable, being the only fairy in the area."

Durval was too surprised about the news that both empires had established successful diplomatic contact to protest about his living arrangements, not that he found any fault with them.

"If the room isn't to your liking, then I apologise," the black-clad girl said, "but it's currently the safest place for you. Most of my employees will not take kindly to a priest of the Light in good standing."

"Present company excluded?" the abbot asked. He glanced curiously at Jadeite and the demonic woman, wondering how they'd react. He could defend himself against most common threats, but those two were decidedly uncommon.

"Yes, my advisers here, as well as Jered, are well aware that I have no interest in furthering the cause of evil," the teenager said firmly.

Surprisingly enough, she wasn't lying. Her words more or less confirmed the Light gods' briefing on her, though They had cautioned him that she had converted to the worship of a dark god since the last time They had been in her head. "In that case, I have a warning to you from the Light."

Mercury's eyes widened, and her stance became more guarded. "Yes?"

"I am supposed to tell you that your old enemy, the Dark Kingdom, has found a way here." Message delivered, he had the dubious pleasure of seeing the Dark Empress, defeater of the Avatar, go white as a sheet.

Youma Kaliki kept her eyes straight on Kunzite's cape as she stayed behind him. The garment waved slightly while he walked, but was otherwise completely ordinary. In Kaliki's opinion, this made it vastly preferable to the group's current surroundings. Tunnels shouldn't shift and writhe with every step. They shouldn't criss-cross and branch with no discernible pattern. Most of all, their walls shouldn't be made of some cloud-like grey stuff that never seemed to hold entirely still. She wondered how the mist-like material could even provide enough resistance for the dark general to step on, since it seemed no more substantial than fog. His boots never sank in deeper than a hand's width, though. Regardless, she would continue hovering, thank you very much.

"Don't wander off the path!" the white-haired figure in front of her barked. "That means you, Zandu!"

Kaliki risked a look and saw that a greenish youma covered in metal discs had moved ahead, demonstrating either initiative or insufficient respect for the dangers of this odd environment. She also noted that the grey tunnel walls had turned into an equally grey sky that extended in all directions, including below. When had that happened? A brief glance down told her that the group was still moving on a free-floating band of cloud stuff.

"General Kunzite, we can take a shortcut!" Zandu responded to the

reprimand. She gestured ahead into the wide expanse, where the narrow path meandered and curved pointlessly. "If we jump down there," she indicated a section of the path that was passing underneath them, having looped back, "then we can avoid that entire convoluted mess!"

"No. We stay on the path." Kunzite didn't even look up from the blood-red gem in his hand that pulsed from within in regular intervals. He was considered the Dark Kingdom's foremost expert on the chaotic space between dimensions, even if he had much more experience sending things here than actually navigating the place.

Nevertheless, Kaliki felt inclined to do exactly what he said while she was here.

"Fine. I'll be waiting for you." Zandu proved that she was too stupid to live by doing exactly what she had suggested, namely jumping off the edge of the path. She hadn't even moved more than a metre before her form distorted and bent like a pretzel and from sight.

Of the half dozen remaining youma, only one didn't stand and gasp. The creature clicked the spider mandibles she had for ears and thrust one of her six brown-furred arm forwards. A line of white web shot towards where Zandu had disappeared. Instead of cutting through the air in a straight line, it performed the same contortions as Zandu had, and then the far end faded from sight. The youma kept a grip on her rope, which went taut after a few seconds. She quickly started reeling in her catch.

Zandu reappeared in a sickening inversion of the previous distortion, looking physically intact as she hit the ground.

"Quick thinking, Ilanko," Kunzite congratulated the spider youma. He glanced over at the groaning heap sprawled out on the wafting floor. "Get that fool up and resume walking," he ordered. "No more breaking formation!"

Being at the front of the group, Kaliki was one of the helpers who pulled the dazed Zandu to her feet and supported her as she stumbled back to her spot. Curious, she took the opportunity to ask

"What happened? What did you see?"

"The inside of my eyes," the metal-covered youma muttered, still out of it.

Right. Why again had she thought asking would be a good idea? She really should have known better. No, she was going to go back to staring at Kunzite's cape and ignoring everything else. That would be much healthier for her sanity.

"Hey, is it just me, or is it getting brighter here?" Someone in the group asked loudly.

I'm not looking, Kaliki thought, stubbornly keeping her gaze on the cloth covering Kunzite's back. Even so, she had to agree that the light reflecting off the white cloth was slowly getting uncomfortably intense.

Kunzite raised his right arm, motioning for the strike force to stop. "Something isn't right," he muttered as he searched his surroundings with narrowed eyes.

"This is far enough," a voice came from no distinguishable source. It was impossible to tell whether the speaker was male or female.

"Who are you? Show yourself!" Kunzite demanded. An orb of darkness appeared in his free hand.

Kaliki couldn't ignore the dark general preparing for battle, no matter how much she wanted to. She extended claws from her fingers. To her right, a red-skinned youma to her left summoned a fiery aura, and another to her left drew a sword with a glass-like blade.

The unseen voice didn't hesitate to respond to Kunzite's challenge. "As you wish."

Not far ahead of the group, golden globs appeared in mid-air, quivering like bubbles ascending through water. They gathered into a column, which coalesced into a softly-glowing figure that could have passed as human, if not for the white, feathery wings protruding from its back.

Kaliki couldn't tell if the strange visuals were a teleportation side effect or if they resulted from the being simply moving through the senseless geometry of this place.

The man - a look at his bare chest revealed what his voice could not - spoke again. "The guardians of the world you seek object to your presence. Begone."

"Who are you that you presume commanding me?" The black orb in Kunzite's left crackled as the dark general glared at the apparition.

"I am but a humble servant of the Light," the angelic figure replied. He didn't draw the sword hanging from his belt, even though the youma were fanning out to flank him. Perhaps he was trusting in the narrowness of the path to foil their manoeuvre. "I will not allow you to pass."

"How do you intend to stop us? Fight? You are heavily outnumbered." Kunzite didn't look as if he was even considering backing down. He would have had to justify that decision to Queen Beryl, after all.

"Violence is not necessary where obfuscation and obstruction will work just as well," the man spoke. His outline wavered, and for an instant, he seemed to be nothing more than a hole in space through which an unbearably bright glare poured in.

Kaliki reflexively averted her eyes and muttered a curse. While blinded, she could hear similar pained protests from all around her, and even Kunzite let out an angry grunt. When her eyes recovered from the brightness, she risked another glance and immediately regretted it.

The winged figure had disappeared without a trace, and so had the path. Now, the force from the Dark Kingdom was drifting in an enormous grey expanse with no visible features.

Kaliki missed the familiar grip of gravity that had, up to know, always been there to help her discern up from down. Not that those concepts made any difference in this vast emptiness. She looked to Kunzite for a clue about what to do.

The dark general was scowling at the gem in his right hand and waving the other over it with circular motions. Aside from his scowl deepening, nothing seemed to change. The stone remained inert, not pulsing even once. "Darkness!" he cursed. "That winged interloper has somehow disrupted our tracking signal!"

Kaliki was much more concerned about the path back, which had disappeared along with everything else. She didn't want to be lost in this strange and inhospitable place forever!

"We weren't too far from our target," the dark general pondered out loud, visibly calming himself as he brushed one hand through his white hair. "We could find the rest of the way on our own. Ilanko!"

"Yes, Lord Kunzite?" The multi-armed youma floated closer to him.

"Attach strings to the others and extend them as necessary. You others," he addressed the remaining youma, "move out in random directions and pull on your string if you find something interesting!"

What, go out into this world that doesn't make sense all alone? Kaliki's thoughts raced as she tried to find a way to weasel out of this. "Lord Kunzite, wait!" she called out. "What if we are currently drifting away from our target without even noticing? We can't tell in an environment like this!" She gestured outwards at the lead-coloured blankness spreading in every direction. "Without correcting for that, we could be searching for all eternity!"

Kunzite looked at her, his eyes calculating. "You raise a very good point. We will need a static point of reference." He moved his right arm to the side, brushing his cape aside. With a flick of his fingers, he called a black ellipse into existence that was a bit taller than he was. "Return to the Dark Kingdom and ask Zoisite to open a portal to my location!"

"Immediately!" Kaliki saluted, cheering inwardly as she approached the gate to safety.

"After that, inform Queen Beryl about this complication."

The youma's success suddenly tasted like ashes.

Camilla could scarcely believe it, but being the Ambassador to a monster-filled wasteland ruled by the most terrifying Keeper of her generation was turning out to be quite boring in practice. Mind-numbingly so. Her problem was that she hadn't been given any actual duties. She had already tried to compose a message home, but aborted the attempt. How did one diplomatically ask if the traditional architecture used by almost all of the high-ranking government officials was secretly evil? She missed her sisters. They would have known what to do.

The fairy decided that brooding in her living room wasn't going to alleviate her boredom, and headed to the entrance hall. There, she picked a raincoat from the massive wardrobe blocking the front door. Immediately after arriving here, the slight fairy had taken almost a quarter of an hour to painstakingly slide the heavy piece of furniture in front of the doorway. The peace of mind she had gained from the knowledge that no evil creature could simply sneak into her home had been well worth the effort. For a short while, anyway. She hadn't been happy when she found out that her quarters were far from finished, and that her dining room was missing two exterior walls.

She pulled the raincoat's hood over her head and left through the gaping hole, stepping out into the construction site. Immediately, strong winds tore at her, threatening to throw her into the deep pits that were beginning to fill with muddy ash and rainwater. She darted toward the narrow entrance to the dungeon, avoiding the worst puddles and keeping her head low to keep the heavy raindrops from striking her face. "Hey! Open up already! It's cold and wet out here!" She called as she hammered with her fists against the block of massive steel that pretended to be a portcullis.

"Who's there?" An unseen guard called from within.

"Ambassador Camilla! Who else? Nobody but me lives out here! Hurry up, it's wet and cold out here!"

"All right, all right."

With a metallic grinding noise that was audible even over the rumbling of the thunderstorm, the gate started to lift.

Camilla darted inside as soon as the metal block had risen high enough for her to get through. Once inside, she removed her hood so that the guards on the other side of a narrow window could see her face.

"It's her," an orc in fancier armour than the others declared, and the second portcullis opened to let the fairy enter the dungeon.

Camilla started exploring with no particular destination in mind. At one intersection, the spherical amulet around her neck heated up rapidly, informing her that she had approached a location that was forbidden to her. She quickly picked a different passage, since she had no intention of falling victim to the dungeon's traps. She also didn't want the amulet to turn her into a turtle for entering an area that was off limits, even if she wasn't entirely sure whether or not the dark empress had been joking about that particular function. As she walked, she passed an open door, hesitated, and backtracked. That room had looked disturbingly like a classroom.

A closer look told her that the small creatures at the desks weren't children, but a mix of goblins and imps. In front of the class, a pink-skinned troll sat half-asleep at a larger desk and observed the creatures through half-closed eyelids. Camilla blinked. The huge-nosed pink creature with a tiny forehead even bore a striking resemblance to her old magic teacher, she thought uncharitably. Well, she had been bored, so she might as well investigate. Her ambassador status should protect her well enough. She stepped into the room and addressed the orc. "Hey, you!"

With a startled grunt, the heavily-built monster sat upright, taking his feet off the desk in the process. "I'm working! I'm working!" Then he took a closer look at his visitor, and his apologetic expression turned into a scowl. "Oh. You aren't anyone important."

"I'm important enough to speak with the Empress on a regular basis!" Camilla retorted, embellishing the truth somewhat. It was something she could reasonably expect for the future, anyway, given the usual duties of an ambassador. Joy. "Now, what's going on here?"

"Test."

Well, that explained the lack of actual teaching taking place."What kind of test?"

"Intelligence."

"So, you are testing imps." Camilla pointed at a big-eyed creature who was frowning as she tried to stuff a square block into a triangular hole.

"Yep."

"And goblins." The fairy indicated a helmeted greenskin who looked at his exam sheet in confusion, unsure how to continue after eating his pen.

"Yep."

"For intelligence."

"Yep."

The blonde fairy looked back at the students and thought about that. Nope, still didn't make any sense. "Why?"

The orc shrugged. "Her Majesty told me to."

"Well, one can't argue with that. Don't you have any idea why she'd want you to do that, though?"

The orc sounded unsure for the first time. "Because the first two tests were inconclusive?"

"Inconclusive how?"

"First test, imps got a perfect score. Goblins did as well as you'd expect."

Camilla frowned. "So how is that an inconclusive result?"

"Her Majesty was looking at the questions at the time."

"I see." She didn't entirely, but figured that it was some weird Keeper thing. "And the second try?"

"Imps got nothing, goblins did same as before."

"Sounds pretty conclusive to me," the young fairy stated.

"Turns out all the goblins got glued to their chairs during the test," the orc elaborated.

"I see. So the imps simply had better things to do than the test?"

"Yep."

Camilla watched both kinds of the small creatures struggle with their tests for a while. It didn't seem as if anyone was slacking off or sneaking around pranking the others this time around. However... "They are cheating," she noted after a while. Neither goblins nor imps were making any great efforts to conceal their glances at each others' sheets.

"Yep."

"Won't that render this test inconclusive too?"

"Yep."

"Shouldn't you be doing something about that, then?"

"Yep."

"So why aren't you?"

The orc muttered something that Camilla couldn't understand, but she got the impression that his cheeks had darkened somewhat.

She approached a step. "Sorry, I didn't catch that?"

"Got glued to my chair," he admitted a bit louder than before. "Don't laugh!" He barked when the fairy started to giggle quietly. "It's not funny!"

Camilla burst into full blown laughter.

"They can be very sneaky!"

"Sorry," the blonde managed to say between laughs. "I'm *sure* they can."

"Fine, be that way," the orc growled, crossing his well-muscled arms. An ugly and sneer appeared on his face. "You are also going to look pretty stupid soon."

Camilla stopped laughing and narrowed her eyes at him. "What do you mean?"

The orc simply pointed at an empty seat in the back and chuckled, making a sound like two rocks grinding against each other.

"Heh? When did that happen?" She was pretty sure that nothing could have sneaked past her, even when she had been laughing.

"Teleport," the pinkskin explained, and his mouth widened into an ugly grin that showed off his teeth. They weren't those of a predator, but they were still quite large.

Camilla instinctively took a step back, or at least she attempted to. She waved her arms to regain her balance when her feet refused to budge from their spot. "Oh, you have got to be kidding me!" she complained as she tried to tear herself loose. Behind her, she could hear an imp giggle in a high-pitched voice. She was starting to see why Anise hated the wicked little things. "You could have warned me!" she accused the orc.

"Yep." He was looking insufferably smug now.

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Healer's Prognosis

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Ami stood in front of a desk, her arms steadied left and right of the crystal ball before her. The light from the glowing orb illuminated the lower parts of her worried face as she searched for any trace of potential intruders. Was the Dark Kingdom already here? Could they attack her any moment now? She considered the most likely point of entry, and immediately paid a mental visit to Metallia's temple on her iceberg. She found only Rabixtrel walking among the purplish-blue pillars, the sound of his hooves echoing loudly through the frozen caverns. With the ill-tempered horned reaper stalking the deserted halls and scaring away prospective worshippers, it was unlikely that any youma had gotten past unnoticed.

Ami tried to clear her head after the first fright by forcing her breathing to slow. Panic wouldn't help her. How could she best detect what the enemy was doing? Check what the leaders are up to! First, she had her scrying device show her queen Beryl.

The red-haired sorceress sat on her throne as usual, and her gaze almost immediately shifted toward the spot from which Ami was watching.

Ami cut the connection, having assured herself that Queen Beryl was still where she belonged. *I hope I'm not expected to sit on my throne all day too as an empress,* the teenager mused. *I'd never get anything done."* She concentrated on Nephrite, and the dark general appeared in the crystal ball before her, wearing sunglasses and a business suit as he moved through a crowd of salary-men in a busy Tokyo street. Worrisome, but unrelated to her current fears.

Ami concentrated again, and the image in the crystal ball blurred and showed her the face of Zoisite. She bit her lips when she saw him leaning against a pillar of dark rock within a cave that wouldn't have looked out-of-place in the Underworld. Was he already here? She paid closer attention to the dark ellipse he was maintaining with

one hand and with a petulant pout on his bored face. Maybe he - she flinched, and her heart skipped a beat when the dungeon heart sent her a warning. An outsider was attacking one of her creatures!

"You! Let go of that imp right now!"

"Gyah!" Camilla jumped half her own height into the air at the sound of Ami's angry voice, coming from right behind the young fairy. Fluttering her wings reflexively, the blonde managed to whirl around in mid air. Her grip slackened, and the imp she had been holding up by the collar dropped to the ground.

Ami was glad she hadn't blasted the attacker with a Shabon Spray Freezing retrieved from storage the moment her Keeper senses had informed her of the situation. If she had taken any less time to verify who she would be hurling it at... Pushing that disconcerting thought aside, she glanced briefly at the imp, who had wandered off to seek her helmet while nursing the bumps on her head. The blue-haired empress put her arms akimbo and glared at Camilla. That fairy had certainly picked the worst time to make trouble! "What do you think you are doing? Do you have *any* idea how close you just came to being turned into an icicle? Explain yourself!"

"I-icicle?" Paling, the blonde fairy took a step backwards and clutched her folded-up raincoat to her chest as if it was a piece of protective armour. "That imp glued me to the floor!" she defended herself, pointing to her left. Her cheeks coloured despite her pallor.

Ami stared at the pair of elegant shoes stuck to the ground somewhere in front of the first row of desks, then back at the bare-footed ambassador. She became also aware of the goblins and imps watching with rapt attention, and shook her head. "I don't have time to deal with this distraction right now," she said in a voice dripping with exasperation. The Dark Kingdom could be gathering life energy to revive Metallia right now! "Imps! Stop it with the pranks! You!" She addressed the orc behind the teacher's desk. "Please escort the Ambassador back to her room!" Minor emergency dealt with, she teleported out to deal with the greater danger.

Camilla blinked at the whirl of snowflakes slowly drifting to the ground where Keeper Mercury had just stood, and let out a breath of relief. "That was scary!"

The imps sniggered.

Camilla ignored them and took a more dignified pose as she addressed the orc. "Shall we go, then?"

"Sure, but..." he gestured in the direction of his backside.

"Oh, right you are still glued to your chair!" Camilla chuckled nervously and snipped her fingers, letting a few sparks of magic flicker across them. "I'm not sure what spell will actually work here, but don't worry! I'm really good at healing spells!"

The orc started sweating at the sight, while the sniggering of the imps redoubled.

Leaning over her crystal ball once again, Ami searched for the last unaccounted-for dark general. When Kunzite finally appeared in the sphere, her eyebrows rose as she tried to parse the sights.

With his flowing cape and white hair, Kunzite was easily recognisable. His current occupation wasn't. For the moment, he seemed to be scolding a youma with glasses, who was holding a huge abacus and looking as if she was on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

A bit behind the two, the black oval of a portal hung in the formless grey void, wavering like a drop of oil on turbulent water as it slowly slid away. It passed in front of another youma with a charcoal-coloured shell, who inhaled deeply and then snorted out a thick, black column of smoke. The miasma quickly enveloped the dark general and the crowd of about a dozen other youma floating there.

Ami watched the edges of the expanding cloud fray and twist into tendril-like shapes that were too intertwined to really make sense of. Any parts of the smoke that passed the boundaries of an irregularly-shaped volume of space faded away. It didn't take the teenager long

to figure out that the sooty fog was used to render the bizarre geometry of the space surrounding the Dark Kingdom expedition visible. To her, the phenomenon looked frighteningly familiar. Metallia's spell for retrieving youma from eternal sleep required navigating a similar dimension.

In the crystal ball, the youma with the abacus inspected the smoky volume for a while, during which the beads on her tool moved so fast that they were a blur. She clenched her eyes shut for a moment, rubbed her greyish temples, and then slowly raised her arm. Her index finger wavered uncertainly between two locations before settling on one.

Kunzite, his arms crossed, said something in her direction, and the youma nodded. He turned to his other troops and gave an order, prompting them all to move over to the spot that the abacus-wielder had indicated.

Ami noted that none of the youma looked very enthusiastic as they positioned themselves in a vertical grid pattern, each one connected to four others with a long rope. She wondered what they were up to when they adjusted their speed so that they were motionless relative to the portal.

Kunzite hit the assembled youma with a carefully-aimed pulse of energy, flinging them past the borders of visible space and revealing the reason for their lack of enthusiasm. He lowered his arm and waited, quietly observing the contorting strings leading to the spots where they had vanished.

After a few minutes, the first of the youma reappeared, unfolding like an origami flower as she drifted past the slackened rope she was attached to.

The white-haired general teleported to the spot where the lizard-like creature had appeared and opened a portal. He let it fade away only an instant later when a second black ellipse appeared right next to him, and nodded at a six-armed underling.

The youma, who was holding the ends of the different ropes, started reeling in all the youma who had yet to reappear.

Next, Kunzite signalled to the smoke-making youma, who started sucking air into her lungs. Apparently, he wanted to start the cycle all over again.

Ami felt it safe to assume that the entire procedure was for the purpose of navigation, though she hadn't the slightest clue how it worked. Nevertheless, she felt reassured by what she was seeing. If the Dark Kingdom had to resort to such makeshift-looking methods, then it had not managed to find a route here yet. She studied Kunzite's features, searching for any hint of boredom or lack of resolve, and found none. So much for the hope that he would get fed up with slow but steady progress and abandon the mission.

She let the crystal ball go dark and wished that it could tell her how close the enemy already was. As it stood, she couldn't even make a rough estimation about when the Dark Kingdom would arrive. The best she could do was assigning a warlock to keep an eye on their progress. In the meantime, she'd have to prepare as well. She'd have to ask Jadeite if there was a way to track and prevent Dark Kingdom portals. With three dark generals able to open them on the enemy side, she needed a way to cut off their reinforcements if she wanted to succeed.

Abbot Durval gripped the railing, the skin over his gnarled fingers whitening as he applied more pressure than necessary. "I almost wish we had taken the staircase," he muttered as the floor boards trembled slightly and chains rattled somewhere above.

Snyder, his red-and-white robes covered by a grey coat similar to the one the abbot was hiding his gold-trimmed vestments with, smiled faintly. "Ah, actually, I am fairly certain you would be wishing the reverse if we had taken the stairs," the redhead said. "The city is distributed over eight different floors, after all."

Durval's muttered as an archway blocked by a grate slid downwards on the wall. "This feels like a lot more than eight floors."

"Well, the rock layers separating each floor are fairly thick in order to accommodate sewers and maintenance tunnels," Snyder was happy

to explain. "Of course, the main reason this ascent is taking longer than normal is that we started out in the dungeon proper, below the city."

"How regrettable." The abbot grimaced when the moving cabin creaked louder than before. "The people here have to put up with this kind of travel regularly?"

"I assure you that this contraption is perfectly safe," Snyder said. "Her Majesty designed it so that it gets stuck if it moves faster than a certain speed. Even if the chains should break, the elevator would not fall."

"I'd say being stuck in a bottomless shaft is a mildly more comforting concept than falling screaming to one's death," the abbot commented as the platform ground to a halt. Without hesitation, he pushed open the double-winged door that had appeared in the wall and fled outside. He froze, mildly taken aback by the bright illumination. Squinting, he turned in a circle and peered at his surroundings.

None of the three or four toga-clad people walking paid special attention to him, but a dark elf with Mercury's coat-of-arms on her armour stopped and looked him up and down from a distance. When Snyder stepped out of the elevator behind the abbot, she nodded slightly in the redhead's direction and disappeared into the entrance of one of the dwellings.

The building caught Durval's interest because it had glass-covered windows, one to the left and one to the right of the stone doorway. He normally wouldn't have considered this entirely practical within a cave, but the Empress' wasteful magical lights shining down from the vaulting ceiling made a good effort at simulating daylight. All in all, if the structure had been topped by a roof, rather than a stone arch that merged with the cave ceiling, it could have passed as a normal house.

"The patients whom her Majesty wants you to see are that way," Snyder said behind him.

Durval, who had moved on to watching the few visible people - none

of which seemed to be in immediate distress - spared a glance back at the acolyte. "How do you find your way around this place, anyway? All the buildings look exactly alike." He gestured toward the four façades facing the cross-shaped plaza he was on. If it wasn't for the elevator building behind him, he would have already forgotten which way he had been turned when he first arrived here.

"Ah, right, the architecture is still rather bland. Empress Mercury has not allowed her imps to fortify the walls, since doing so would make it impossible for the inhabitants to customise the houses to their liking. Which they, unfortunately, haven't gotten around to yet. In the meantime, the maps in every plaza are fairly helpful." Snyder stepped around the elevator building and pointed at a large design drawn onto its side.

Durval had at first taken the regular pattern for a decoration of some sort. "This is a map? It looks like a ring made of smaller rings that are in turn made of smaller rings." Ring was not exactly the right word, since all of the shapes were formed of right angles, but that was the easiest description he could come up with.

"The smallest rings are blocks of four houses surrounding an inner backyard," Snyder explained. "Those blocks, in turn, surround small spaces like the one we are on right now. The Empress is filling those as required, for example with fountains, stairs, or elevators like the one we are looking at."

Durval briefly paid attention to a large counterweight rising from the depths before taking another look at the map, making use of what he had just learned. "So we would logically be in this single green-coloured space now?""Yes, and the maps are all on the south side of buildings, so we are looking towards the north at the moment. We need to make our way over there toward the largest space in the centre," the redhead said. "That's where the hospital is, along with the other municipal buildings."

"Very well." Durval fell in step behind the renegade acolyte, content for now to let him lead. With no need to find his own route, he felt free to study the details of his environment. He noted that less than half of the buildings had curtains in their windows. "How big is this city, anyway?"

"Four houses to a small block, sixteen small blocks to a ring, sixteen rings composing the central ring," Snyder replied. "Slightly more than one thousand apartments per city floor, of which there are eight."

"Most of her captives are children, who will not live alone," Durval pointed out. At least he hoped that this was the case. There was no telling what a Keeper might do. "Is she planning to acquire additional residents?"

Snyder shrugged. "I am fairly certain that she isn't planning anything along those lines. If I was to guess, I would say that she simply liked the regular pattern and had imp-power to spare." The acolyte's brown eyes darted left and right briefly. In a lower voice, he added "All that digging keeps the imps busy. They tend to get unpleasant when they have nothing to do."

"Delightful." Had there been a pick-wielding silhouette moving in the shadows? No, it had probably been his imagination. Durval continued onwards, only to stagger when he passed a grate, and a gust of wind tore at his clothes. He let out a displeased grunt as he leaned more heavily onto his staff.

"Oh, sorry about that. We are having slight problems with regulating the ventilation, since not all of the ducts are finished yet."

"I'm feeling sorry for the people living here already. More sorry." In truth, he had seen much worse settlements. Here, at least the building were all solid and not draughty, the smell of livestock was absent, and the streets were wide and well-kept. If it wasn't for the evil creatures patrolling the streets, never seeing the sunlight, the dungeon underfoot, and the landlord being a Keeper, then it might actually have been an adequate place to live.

"Now, now, we are having some difficulties, but for most people, the accommodations should be an improvement over what they had before. Each house has access to running hot and cold water, and the lair-type magic on their rooms allows the inhabitants to adapt the furniture more to their needs. Within limits, of course."

"Difficulties?"

"Ah, yes." Snyder scratched the back of his head. "You may have noticed the unusual wrappings that most inhabitants are clad in? We lack well-made clothes and other common commodities that require skilful labour to make. There are some people who have the prerequisite skills, but little incentive to use them. Nobody here arrived with money, and there aren't many goods for bartering either."

"The Empress could simply pay them," Durval pointed out the obvious.

"Yes, she could, as long as those she pays would not be averse to being hired by a Keeper and considered minions by the dungeon heart. The process seems to be automatic." He let out a sigh. "Suffice it to say, most find the prospect unpalatable. She also cannot simply give the people money, since that would make her creatures unhappy."

"The standard Keeper response to such a dilemma would be the vigorous application of threats and violence," the abbot pointed out. He had heard about things like that happening too often to feel at ease, even if such a course of action would be incongruous with first building a city like this.

"Mercury does not use such methods," Snyder dismissed the notion with a wave of his hand. "We are currently looking into different options. Jered brought up the strange notion of paying the inhabitants money, but filing it as tax returns."

"Tax... returns?" Durval struggled with the alien concept for a moment.

"Well, it involved declaring the income tax rate to be one hundred percent and services rendered to the Crown to be of a certain value, with some easily-met conditions for tax deductions, so that the state would end up owing the taxpayers money. I think." Snyder shrugged his shoulders, looking lost as he watched Durval's expression become more and more dubious. "It seemed all rather convoluted to me. Please don't ask me to explain the details, I would not be able to. Also, the hospital is just ahead." Snyder pointed past the receding houses at a larger hall.

"Very well. I admit that I am rather curious about seeing this strange cure for cursed wounds for myself." Durval put his thoughts about the dark empire's strange fiscal notions aside as he prepared to see if he could help the people who needed it.

Ami transported herself to the hospital and found Durval poking a warding stone with his staff, his eyes narrowed in suspicion. Since the necromantic glyph engraved into the stone tile was designed to kill one variant of the common cold virus, his misgivings were understandable. She cleared her throat, causing the old man to whirl around, the ivory top of his staff pointing in her direction.

"Oh. Your Majesty," he said in a deadpan tone of voice, returning the implement slowly to a more vertical position.

Ami directed a weak smile at him. "Sorry for leaving in the middle of welcoming you, but I had to react immediately to your warning."

"Did you deal with the threat to your satisfaction?"

"Not exactly, but I am now reasonably certain that we aren't moments from being ambushed by an army of creatures roughly equivalent to dark angels," Ami said quietly.

"*Reasonably certain?*" Durval repeated, both eyebrows crawling up his wrinkly forehead. Colour was quickly leaving his face.

"For the moment, they seem to be lost, so there isn't much that I can do about them directly," Ami replied. "Now, you were investigating the eyes of some volunteers. Did you learn anything that could help cure them permanently?"

Durval frowned. "You have certainly stumbled upon a novel method for treating cursed wounds," the abbot said. "Nevertheless, it does not do anything about the curse itself, which remains as strong and malevolent as before. I have attempted to use my healing powers on the artificial eyeballs, with undesirable results."

"What happened?" Ami asked, looking more alert.

"Any real tissue that my spells coaxed to grow within the eyeball quickly withered and died, and I had to clear it out" the holy man stated plainly.

"Was anyone hurt?" the teenage Keeper asked, now seriously alarmed.

"No, the illusory tissue responded fine to my treatment," the white-bearded man continued. "However, I am fairly certain that no permanent cure will be possible as long as the curse remains."

"Oh." Ami looked at the ground, her lips pressed together into a thin line as her loathing for Crowned Death and his servants grew. She hoped that her warlocks or Jered would return with useful intelligence soon. "What about natural regeneration?" she asked, looking up with hope in her crimson-glowing eyes.

"It is hard to tell right now, but I tend to expect the worst outcome wherever curses are concerned," Durval said mildly.

Ami made an effort to control her emotions when she noticed that the elderly man had brought the table between himself and her, and replaced her frigid expression with a forced smile. Perhaps a change of topic was in order. "Abbot Durval, I am curious about something, but it is a somewhat personal question." She clasped her hands in front of herself as she looked at him.

"Ask away, but I don't promise that I will answer," the abbot said after a moment.

"Ah, you obviously have extraordinary healing powers, and yet you are walking bent and use your staff as a walking stick. I was wondering why you aren't curing your ailments."

"There is only so much that my magic can do about the effects of old age," Durval replied. With a slight smirk, he added "I'll have you know that I am still feeling pretty spry for someone well past his second century."

"Second-" Ami reflexively hid her mouth behind her palm as she gaped at him. That explained a few things, except... "You serve the

Light gods directly. Why don't *they* do something about your ageing, then?"

"The Light has stopped extending life indefinitely a long time ago, because They were only able to do so for a limited number of people. No matter whom They selected, the fact that there were only a lucky few individuals bred nothing but envy and misery. Aside from the normal jealousy, there were always those who wished to obtain one of the limited slots by any means necessary. With no new openings becoming available due to the current holder ageing and dying, well..." Durval shrugged his shoulders. "The mighty were especially prone to feeling entitled about getting on the list. Not that seeing your family and friends all grow old and die is really such a great thing, in hindsight. After thorough evaluation, the Light decided that the practice did more harm than good. They are, however, not preventing anyone from researching their own solutions to the problem."

Ami remained quiet as she pondered his words. Put that way, immortality really sounded like something that could tear families apart and bring misery to everyone involved. She felt her hackles rise when she realised that she may very well be in that situation, and was suddenly very aware of her dungeon heart's heartbeat.

As if divining her thoughts, Durval explained "The dark gods have have little qualms about granting immortality, for much the same reasons as the Light *does* have them. Fortunately, they aren't very good at it, aside from undeath and dungeon hearts."

"You don't seem very anxious about the prospect of death," Ami stated, more to herself.

"I have it on good authority that the afterlife isn't so bad, and even another go at life may be possible," the abbot said with a wink. "But now, I also have a question for you." The momentary playfulness disappeared from his voice as he locked his inquisitive gaze on her. "You did not bring me here just to have a look at your patients, did you? There must be something more to it."

Ami nodded. "You are right. The main reason why I needed someone of your skill is somewhat different," she said. Allowing

herself a mischievous smile, she asked "How good are you at manipulating dark energies?"

Last edited: Jul 1, 2016

A Short Break

Originally on 2011-12-16T22:29:00

"I will have no part in this!" With a furious swipe, abbot Durval flung a pair of dark gauntlets off the table before him.

Eyes widening, Ami made an upward motion with her left, telekinetically catching the objects an instant before they could slam into the laboratory's wall. Heart beating rapidly, she reeled them in and inspected the egg-shaped gems set into the gauntlets' backs. No cracks, she noted with relief.

"Please be more careful with these," she said, her voice wavering as she struggled to keep it calm. She presented the clear ovoids to the red-faced abbot, who was watching her with his arms crossed. One of her fingers slid over the smooth surface of the largest jewel, disturbing the smoke-like substance trapped within. "These gems are somewhat fragile and store a large amount of dark energy," she explained softly. "If you break them, they could explode!"

Durval's eyebrows twitched in surprise, and the part of his cheeks that wasn't covered by his white beard and moustache lost some of its redness. "Then it is for the best that I am not going to touch them again," he declared.

"But why?" Ami asked. She looked Durval straight in the eyes. "Don't you want to help all those people?"

"You want me to twist the Light's power according to your own designs, using the energy of your dark god," Durval stated with conviction. He eyed the gloves that Ami was still holding up as if they were venomous snakes. "I fail to see how anything good could arise from such blasphemy!"

"Oh. I see that I'll need to explain myself better." Unperturbed, Ami summoned a large diagram she had prepared for just that occasion and unrolled it. She held it up so that the abbot could easily see the different representations on paper. "I got this idea when I noticed

that Crowned Death can convert other energies into more of his own, so I sought to emulate the technique and-"

"Hold it!" Durval threw his hands up in the air, interrupting Ami's lecture before she could even get started. "You want to incorporate the methods of a dark god into a spell of healing? The Living Evils are no good at it, and the Death god doubly so!"

"Technically, it's not so much about healing the subject as it is about destroying the curse," the blue-haired girl corrected. "As such, it's a healing spell only in the sense that the target is better off afterwards."

"So in essence, you want me to pervert the Light's power into a destructive spell," Durval said.

"That's really not the way you should be looking at it," Ami said, trying to maintain her enthusiasm in the face of the holy man's implacable hostility. "It's still meant for a good purpose, one that I'm sure the Light would approve of! I also assure you that I have no intention of using it as a weapon."

The abbot's gaze bored into Ami as he stared at her, not speaking a word. His one raised eyebrow expressed eloquently enough what he thought of that statement.

Ami hung her head. "Fine. The idea of using the spell against the dark gods has crossed my mind," she admitted. "Unfortunately, it wouldn't work on them. They have so much power that the fine structures that needs to be introduced into the invading energy would be crushed upon contact. Besides, it only works in the presence of life energy," she explained. She didn't bother hiding her disappointment.

"In other words, it would work just fine on good people who have had no reason to develop a shield against it."

Ami looked up, her eyes flashing furiously. "Look, all I want that spell for is healing these people so they can finally go home! I wouldn't need you to make it dangerous! The hard part is getting the spell right so it *isn't* lethal!"

"I imagine basing it on something you saw Crowned Death do would have that effect," the abbot nodded. He didn't sound entirely hostile any more, but was still far from convinced.

"My own theory is that the dungeon heart's corruption is the culprit," Ami said.

"Since you brought up corruption, Empress," the abbot gestured at the gauntlets that the teenager had placed back on the table, "you want me to channel power you received directly from that Metallia goddess you worship. There is very little in the world that I consider more dangerous than working with things derived directly from a dark god. Your plan involves *two* of them."

"I have designed the gloves so that your contact with dark energy will be kept to a strict minimum," Ami said. "The main contact area would be the fingernails." She pointed at the small silver plates at the fingertips of the gloves. "It's just enough to draw power from the gemstone reservoirs through that web of wires that connects to them. Almost all of the actual manipulation will happen outside of your body."

"I am more concerned about the soul." Durval's arms remained crossed.

"Look, even if there should be some side effects, the Light gods should be able to fix them, right?" Ami pleaded. "And you would be developing a better cure for cursed wounds! If you showed the Light the finished pattern, then they could probably replicate it! The terror of cursed wounds could fade into the past entirely! Isn't that worth it?"

The old man looked at Ami's face again, his gaze so piercing that her smile wavered. He asked "Curing cursed wounds is really your only goal here, and you would let me spread the knowledge afterwards?"

"Yes!"

Durval blinked twice, his mouth opening in surprise. He quickly closed it and let out a long sigh. "All right," he said, sounding

resigned. He gestured at the gloves lying on the steel table. "I'll give it a try. How do I use those *things*?"

"Thank you, you won't regret it!" Ami said, inclining her head briefly.

"I certainly hope so," the abbot muttered, almost inaudibly.

"These gauntlets are not unlike a wand that has been pre-charged with magic, and they are triggered in a similar way," Ami explained happily. She picked up one of the gloves and held it so that the abbot could see inside. "You put it on and make sure it fits right. Each fingertip acts like the tip of a wand and has variable output, so using it right may require some training."

The abbot nodded along slowly, making no secret of his lack of enthusiasm.

"Do you see the smaller gems on the knuckles? They act as intermediary reservoirs so that drawing energy from one finger will not affect the output of the others. This is important, since the energy manipulation spell requires very precise control."

"How precise are we talking here?"

"It's here on the diagram. That sequence over here." Since her hands were full with the gloves, she had the paper unroll and float over to the abbot. "The thickness of the lines corresponds to the amount of power that needs to be put into them."

Durval's head jerked back a slight distance as he saw the complex patterns. "That, frankly, looks like an unholy mess to me. Have you actually tried to perform this procedure yourself?"

Ami clutched the gloves to her chest. "Yes. Err, I may have had some help from the dungeon heart," she admitted. Looking up, she said "However, there's no reason this couldn't work just by rote memorising the different motions and timings. All that's needed is fine control and a good memory." She blinked as something occurred to her, and hesitated for a moment. Somewhat embarrassed, she asked "Um, your memory wouldn't be..."

"I'm old, not infirm, girl," Durval snapped indignantly. He

harrumphed. "Nevertheless, it would be helpful if you could figure out the proper incantations for simplifying the arcane gestures. That convergence of three lines over there, for example, looks as if it could be summarised by a properly pronounced Sul rune."

"Well, I don't actually have any formal training in spell creation," Ami admitted. When the abbot raised his eyebrows, she clasped her hands in front of herself. His teacher-like demeanour made her feel somewhat inadequate. "I can place some of the more common syllables, but I have never had the time to actually study how warlocks put chants and incantations together. For me, it's much easier to manipulate the magic directly using the dungeon heart. It is a fascinating subject though," she hurried to reassure him.

"Well, I don't have a dungeon heart," Durval noted.

Ami thought about the book containing her knowledge about the dark artefacts, which she had stuffed into the Avatar's mantle a while back. "Perhaps that-"

"And I am *quite* pleased with that state of things," the old man interrupted, his voice brooking no contradiction.

"R-right." One look at his dark expression convinced Ami that she would lose any progress she had made if she insisted on explaining what she had been meaning to say. She could return to the topic later, anyway. Instead, she pointed at the diagram. "Actually, I don't think the words for most of these operations have been invented yet. The spell's pattern has little in common with those I have encountered so far."

"Possible," Durval said, looking at the criss-crossing lines sideways. "Wizards rarely come up with something so convoluted."

"It is much clearer than Crowned Death's original variant," the teenage Keeper defended her work. She was proud of it, and it deserved more appreciation! "Unfortunately, I don't remember any books in my library describing how to actually derive the words," Ami pondered out loud.

"That's because, at heart, it comes down to trial, error, and random

chance." Durval said. "The magical academies would insist that there is more to it, of course. However, the core element of a typical discovery would be an apprentice casting the spell while trying out words and observing what happens."

Ami blinked. "Apprentice?" She would have expected research to be conducted by properly qualified magic users.

"More experienced wizards have long since learned *not* to do that," the abbot explained. "The side effects of the wrong words are often dramatic and dangerous." He shook his head and sighed. "The accidents I have had to fix..."

Ami knew well what uncontrolled magic could do, remembering the chickens exposed to the chaotic run-off from her original dungeon heart. "There has to be some kind of system behind it," she speculated. Not that she would necessarily be able to discern it. She was still no step closer to being able to use Jadeite's glamour than when she started out.

"Perhaps. If so, nobody has discerned it yet. Meaningful sentences tend to work mildly better in general, or so most scholars agree."

"I'll see what I can do about figuring out the right incantation," Ami agreed. "I really want this project to succeed." It could contribute significantly to some of the other research she still had on her to-do list, too.

"Don't lose too many warlocks on my behalf, your Majesty," Durval said. The mocking curve of his lips indicated that he wouldn't mind terribly if she did.

"I don't intend to lose any," the young empress replied. "Besides, they are already busy with other projects. Now, why don't you familiarise yourself with the gauntlets?"

Durval took one of the gloves and held it up with two fingers so he could glare at it from up close. His expression was that of a man forced to shove his hand into a heap of glass shards as he put the gauntlet on.

"How is the fit? I can adjust them for you if they are uncomfortable."

The abbot's knobbly fingers twitched inside their new coverings. "They feel heavy," he commented as he moved his hands through the air in experimental circles.

"It's full of metal wiring," Ami explained. She touched her right earring, and a blue visor slid over her eyes. "Please try to direct some energy at the far wall. I need to see if I need to make any adjustments."

Durval obediently drew his fingers through the air, leaving ten inky trails in their wake.

"Small tightening of the left middle finger valve required," Ami muttered. "Right thumb output oscillates, but is within tolerances. Not bad." She scribbled down some notes, pleased by what she was seeing.

The old man grumbled something into his beard.

"Now, how about an actual spell? Something inoffensive that you know well would be best," Ami said, watching the abbot from the side.

"Would a shield dome suffice?"

"That would be perfect," Ami confirmed with a smile.

Durval rubbed his fingers against each other as if they were itching before he took a battle stance and drew his hands through the air in a practised, elegant motion.

A semi-spherical black outline appeared around the holy man. With a shrill shattering noise, it collapsed before it could fully form, causing him to flinch.

Ami's eyes went round when the abbot's twitch released another pulse of dark energy. The fragments of his shield spell shot outwards like shrapnel, some coming her way. To her side, metal screamed as one of the shards buried itself within the table. Just before she could bring up her own shield, she felt a jolt of pain pass

through her right upper arm. She staggered as her body suddenly felt lighter on that side, and she heard a thud next to herself on the floor.

Durval remained where he had been, motionless. Thin gashes covered the floor and walls around him, oozing wisps of darkness, but he paid them no mind. He was gaping at Ami as if he had just seen the invincible dark empress severely injured by a magical accident.

Ami followed his gaze to her severed arm on the ground, and she cringed. Overcoming the brief instant of panic at the sight of the limb, she said "I'm fine, really!" There was a little pain from the water-oozing stump growing from her shoulder, but the glamour that sent the nerve signals went only skin deep. "It doesn't feel worse than a paper cut!" Briefly, she pondered what it said about her mental health that she felt more distressed by the damage to her Keeper outfit than by the injury. Rationally speaking, she knew that a damaged ice golem would regenerate on its own, while her uniform might require the attention of a tailor, but still...

The abbot shut his mouth with an audible click. "Oh. Of course."

"I try to avoid being in my own body when I'm around people whom I can't trust completely." Ami's voice took on a more gurgling quality as Jadeite's glamour dissolved. To a certain degree, it could incorporate changes, but the body shrinking as it grew a new icy arm was beyond its adaptive abilities. "No offence intended."

"I think I'd be more offended if you did trust me that much," Durval said, his tone quiet. His eyes darted left and right, lingering on the shallow cuts in the stone. "That was *not* supposed to happen."

"I agree completely." Ami, her icy body now slightly too small for her Keeper outfit, used her regrown arm to tighten her belt. "From what I could tell, you were mixing traces of holy power into the spell, destabilising it even before it could fully form."

Durval's brow furrowed. "Are you certain? I did not notice any such thing."

Ami nodded and tapped the side of her visor. "You may be so used to channelling Light energies that you do it unconsciously. I think it would be best if you stuck to training exercises for the moment until you are more familiar with dark magic."

The old man let out a sigh and stared at the melting arm on the ground. "That may be prudent."

"I'll leave you to that, then." Ami bowed politely. "If you require anything," the living statue snapped one finger, and an imp rushed into the room and skidded to a halt before her, "just let her know, and she'll find me." She patted the creature on the helmet. "You. Wait here until the Abbot requires your services."

The look which the imp directed at the hunched-over old man was almost as sceptical as his own. She shrugged and nodded.

"Good. Oh, and feel free to use up all the dark energy stored in the gloves. I can provide you with more whenever you wish."

"Joy," Durval commented. "Very well, Empress. I shall see to this task."

As Ami walked toward the door, she pondered if his own bow being shallower than hers meant anything.

Behind her back, the imp waved at Durval with the severed arm.

Ami decided to tackle the problem currently locked into her bedroom. She appeared within the chamber and immediately spotted the green and black mass of tentacles piled up next to her bed.

In turn, an eye at the top of the mound opened and swivelled to stare at her. *"Empress,"* the being greeted her as it uncoiled like a mass of writhing snakes.

"Tserk. You have recently learned something that I would have preferred to keep a secret," Ami began.

"That acolyte and his continued allegiance to the Light? You are asking for trouble there, your Majesty."

"Nevertheless, I want it to remain a secret." Ami crossed her arms and directed a stern look at the creature. Properly staring the monster down proved more difficult than expected, since the her gaze kept wandering from one group of randomly-placed eyes to the next.

"You are not going to do anything rash about it, right?" The tentacle monster's mental voice sounded understandably nervous. *"I'm at least as useful as he is!"*

"I only want you to keep quiet about it. I intend to keep him in my service, and I don't want him to be bothered!"

"Well, I could be convinced to keep that secret..." Tserk let the statement trail, the tips of his tentacles twitching as if grasping at things in his imagination.

"I think so, too," Ami said, keeping her voice friendly. "Let me give it a try. First, I'm a Keeper. Second, if the secret gets out, I'll know exactly who talked."

"I'm convinced! I'm convinced!" Tserk backed down immediately and slithered a short distance further away from her. *"No need to become unpleasant."* The creature hesitated for a moment. *"Nevertheless, I haven't been able to indulge properly in my particular tastes for a while. Are you sure there is nobody who needs a massage?"*

A tentacle monster shouldn't try the puppy-dog eye look, Ami thought. Sheer quantity of eyes couldn't quite make up for the lack of inherent cuteness. Still, she gave the proposal some thought. She hadn't scheduled anything that needed to be done right this moment, and she had been feeling awfully tense lately. She could afford some time to rest and relax.

"What am *I* doing here?" Tiger asked, her fists resting on her towel-clad waist. The tiger-striped youma sat down on the raised edge of the huge marble bathtub, well out of reach of the tentacles further ahead.

Ami let her book sink onto the bench she was lying on. Tserk's tentacles obligingly ceased kneading her back as she twisted her upper body to look at her adopted sister. "It's your fault that Tserk learned about Snyder in the first place. Thus, it's only fair that you do your part in keeping it happy." She used the hand she wasn't using to clutch her towel to her chest to indicate the free bench to her side.

"Bribery? Really?" The youma scratched her chin."And what is she doing here?"

"You wouldn't believe how sore muscles can get after a day of training with the various beasties," Cathy commented from the third bench. She had foregone a towel, opting to wear the essential parts of the reaper outfit as an improvised swimsuit instead. "Jered isn't back yet, so Tserk is an acceptable substitute. A bit higher up the calves," she instructed the many-limbed masseur.

"If you say so." Tiger's mildly disapproving frown disappeared as she clapped her hands together and beamed at Ami. "I'd have expected you to invite a different blonde for something like this, really," she said with a leer.

Ami's brief satisfaction about getting Tiger back for her teasing died quickly as blood rushed to her face. "Jadeite is busy interrogating the two new youma he recently fished out of the temple!" she blurted out. While part of her found the combination of Jadeite and massage fascinating, she wasn't nearly bold enough to act on it. Never mind the highly distracting fantasies her imagination provided as it ran with the idea. How would she even approach him about something like that? Awkward. She shoved the uncomfortable and yet tantalising thoughts aside to snap at the giggling youma "Now get over here!"

"I don't really feel like it," the youma protested.

Please? Tserk begged.

"Hmm. Well, I suppose it would be a shame to disappoint the tentacle monster," Tiger said with a grin. Then she disappeared, leaving an empty shell of stone to crumble onto the white floor tiles.

"Why that lying-"

A rock appeared in mid-air over the basin and burst apart, sending small fountains upwards as its debris hit the warm water. Tiger had returned, carrying a slender figure wearing a nightgown. "Here, have a substitute instead!"

"Bwah?" the fairy slung underneath Tiger's arm groaned sleepily, struggling in the youma's grip. "What's going on?"

"You are supposed to join them," the youma said as she set the glitter-trailing girl down.

Camilla blinked and peered through the hot steam. Her golden eyes widened when she spotted Cathy in her current state of undress, and went even rounder when she recognised the tentacle monster. Then, she spotted the dark empress, face flushed, clad only in a towel, and enveloped by vigorously-moving tentacles. "Oh, no, no, NO!" she wailed in sudden understanding, scrambling backwards. Her back hit the basin's wall with an audible thud. "I want no part of this kind of sick activities!"

"Tiger, that's not funny!" Ami sat up and directed a glare at her laughing sister.

"Speak for yourself. I'm finding it hilarious!"

"Are you *trying* to get me into trouble with the Shining Concord Empire? You can't just break in and abduct an ambassador!"

"I didn't break in, it's your building until you officially hand it over. Until then, she isn't a proper ambassador either," Tiger pointed out cheekily. "Besides, it's *your* reputation that has her terrified!"

"Which is all based on misunderstandings and false rumours!" Ami replied. "You should know how I feel about that," she accused the youma, frowning deeply.

"Yeah, you get waaaay too worked up about it," Tiger quipped.

"Is that so?" Ami's eyes narrowed. Why couldn't Tiger simply get it? "Perhaps you would like to find out what it is like? I'm sure some

appropriate situations could be engineered easily enough..."

"Oh, I'm so scared!" Tiger's outline blurred, and she shrunk a head. When the flickering stopped, she was a mirror image of Ami, right down to the glowing eyes. "Downright terrified! Whoops, I seem to have dropped my towel!"

Ami blushed brightly. "Don't do that!"

Her double let out a frightened squawk as she disappeared underwater, dunked by an invisible force. Glamour broken, she reappeared, coughing up water. "That's cheating!"

Not to intrude, but the fairy is escaping, Tserk interrupted, pointing a pseudopod in the direction of Camilla, who was crawling on all fours toward the exit.

"Eep!" Giving up on stealth, the fairy abandoned her cover in favour of a desperate dash for the doorway.

A fast-moving tentacle whistled through the air and wrapped around her ankle, yanking her back.

"Let me go!" the winged blonde screamed as she dangled upside-down from the pseudopod.

"Let her go!" Ami shouted too.

Tserk let go.

Camilla squealed in surprise as she dropped into the pool, landing on Tiger with a loud splash.

Cathy started when the resulting spray of water hit her skin. "Hey, I'm trying to relax here. Keep it down, children!"

"I don't even want to be here!" Camilla complained as she surfaced, her wings wet and limp.

"Get your fat arse off me," Tiger grumbled from below the fairy.

The slender blonde only now noticed her abductor. "Gyah! Get away

from me, you striped freak!" She churned the water as she tried to disentangle herself from the youma.

"Who are you calling a- oof!" Tiger took a bony elbow to the nose. "Why you!" She lunged after the fleeing girl.

The splashing resumed with redoubled intensity.

"Watch it with the water already!" Cathy scolded in the general direction of the brawl. Another wave splashed over her, thoroughly drenching her.

"Not my only nightgown!" Camilla shouted.

"My hair! You set my hair on fire!" Tiger screeched.

Cathy sat up and shook herself like a dog. "Oh, let me help you with that," she said sweetly, bringing her arms up in front of her chest. "Shabon Spray!"

Scintillating bubbles shot forwards from her hands, enveloping the girls in a freezing fog that billowed outwards. From within came piercing shrieks of protest. "Cold! Cold!" "Eeek!"

"Sigh. Why can't anything ever go right?" the tentacle monster lamented as the chilling mist washed over it.

Tserk's statement mirrored Ami's own feelings. The blue-haired teenager let herself sink back onto her bench, covering her eyes with her book and ignoring the sudden urge to repeatedly bang her head against something hard.

"My Empress?" Torian's voice came as a welcome distraction, even if Ami experienced a moment of embarrassed indignation before she realised that the warlock wasn't physically present.

"Yes?" She answered, a bit sterner than she had intended.

Torian hesitated for a moment. *"Did I contact your Majesty at a bad time? If so, I apologise,"* he began nervously. *"We have spotted something strange that we really think you should have a look at."*

The High Temple of Crowned Death

Originally on 2011-12-31T01:01:00

As soon as Ami appeared, frigid winds whipped her short skirt around her legs and ripped away the snowflakes surrounding her. She flinched from the sudden drop in temperature and hoped that the surrounding storm clouds had sufficiently dampened the blue flash of her arrival. Since the turbulent weather prevented her from seeing the ocean below, she hoped that whatever dwelt beneath the waves remained unaware of her presence.

"Any reaction down there?" she asked her assistants back in the dungeon, thousands of kilometres away.

"Negative. No changes." Torian's dream-like voice rang in her mind.

The blue-haired girl let go of the large cylinder she was cradling in her arms. Without the aid of her Keeper powers, she would have been barely able to even lift the torpedo-shaped device. For the moment though, she used it as an improvised bench floating in mid-air.

"Inform me when the wind dies down near the surface," she instructed the remote warlock.

"As you wish, your Majesty."

Ami figured that there was a temple to Crowned Death somewhere below the surface. To her chagrin, she lacked accurate - or any - information on it. Crystal balls couldn't penetrate the darkness in the ocean trench below. However, they had shown her a number of seagulls in the sky, too far away from any land to survive.

"Wind seems low right now. No zombie birds either," Torian informed her.

"All right." Ami reached for a couple of Shabon Sprays she had put into Keeper storage and released them directly at their destination.

The blasts of bubbles struck the water below and instantly burst into a thick bank of sound-devouring fog. No sooner than the mist had appeared, it billowed outwards and frayed at the edges.

Ami didn't lose any time. She slid off the cylinder, wrapped her arms around it, and teleported into her fog below. Only a faint splash announced to the world that she had dropped her cargo into the waves. Payload delivered, the teenager winked out of existence once more, returning to her hideout in the clouds. Only a few foamy droplets running down her black leotard revealed how close she had just gotten to the surface of the sea.

"An admirable performance, as expected of your Majesty" Torian commented. *"I would have missed it if I had blinked!"*

Ami didn't answer and concentrated on her computer screen. It showed her a bluish-grey panorama that grew darker while her probe sank deeper. She bit her lip as she tapped some keys and waited for the result. When the image tilted to the side, she let out the breath she had been holding. Remote control was still working fine. She hadn't been too sure of its tolerances, since she had assembled the entire fish-like automaton in a rather slap-dash manner.

With her Keeper powers, she reached into the remote probe and deactivated the propeller at its tail end in order to conserve battery power. She would simply push the automaton through the water manually until it encountered claimed territory. That way, everything aside from the magical visor at the tip of the device could remain passive until it was really needed.

She pulled the probe to the left, adjusting its course toward a trench on the ocean floor. So far, her vehicle seemed to deal well with the rising water pressure, but a degree of uncertainty remained. She couldn't see the probe with her Keeper powers, only feel it, and so she relied on its camera to navigate.

On her computer screen, grey pictures of the ocean floor scrolled upwards as the probe sank deeper into the trench. The visor she had built into the machine could not only see in the dark, it also routed the signals from the Mercury computer to the rest of the

machinery. She didn't feel entirely confident about that feat of improvised engineering; her goggles weren't really meant to interface with anything, at least not using wires. Acquiring a visor in the right shape for the streamlined underwater vehicle had been a minor hurdle in comparison. With a quick possession and transformation, she had produced one set of appropriately-shaped goggles and one very confused shark.

A tiny deep sea fish investigated the probe from up close, startling Ami by filling the screen with a set of fangs that even Rabixtrel would have envied. She got a good reading on the grotesque creature before it darted away, revealing it to be alive, if ugly. This proved to be the last moment of excitement during her search for the next twenty minutes. *"Torian, are you sure this is the right location? I haven't found anything unusual so far."*

"Positive, your Majesty! It looked as if the stars had fallen into the abyss. My colleagues will confirm that! Perhaps you need to go deeper?"

"The probe can't go any deeper without burrowing into the ground," Ami replied. Her scans showed the ocean floor to be a gooey plain devoid of vegetation. *"There's no sign of a structure of the size you described."*

Torian remained quiet for a while. *"Your Majesty, I am loath to suggest this, but could your artefact have been carried off its intended course by a treacherous current without you noticing?"*

"It's unlikely, but I can try to get a look from a higher vantage point." Ami started lifting the probe toward the surface. On her computer, she called up a map to verify that she was really searching the right area. Comparing the green dot on the representation of the underwater trench with her own position, she noted that she was indeed looking in the right place. She stared at the map she had constructed from her scans for a while, seeking nooks and crannies she might have missed. Her eyes narrowed, and she zoomed in on one of the slopes. *"I think I may have been too close,"* she pondered.

"Your Majesty?"

"I'm going to look at a different spot," she replied. *"I spotted something odd higher up."*

She dragged the probe further upwards until it was about a kilometre off the ground, directing it towards the narrowest part of the underwater trench. As it got closer to its destination, she had to start correcting for the currents speeding up as they flowed through the choke point. Nevertheless, she managed to keep the camera steady on the one feature that interested her.

Seen from afar, the wide groove in the otherwise smooth layer of dirt coating the flanks of the trench stood out far more distinctly than it had from up close. Due to its size, Ami had mistaken it for the natural result of a mudslide when her probe had first passed over it. It hadn't occurred to her that the sludge layer of the surrounding slopes remained intact. Some of them were even steeper than the one she was looking at right now. She swerved the probe to the left, sweeping with the camera over the straight, horizontal line that separated sludge from bared rock.

"Torian, what is the largest creature that lives in the sea?" To her, this looked suspiciously as if something huge had brushed the ooze away.

"Err, I will have to get back to you on that, your Majesty. I don't deal with beasts."

Ami formed a theory as she waited. With the way the trench tapered at this point, the currents would become faster, making it harder to manoeuvre. Something could have been pushed against the walls, unable to correct its course in time. Experimentally, she loosened her grip on the probe to observe where it would be carried. Yes, the flow direction seemed about right. She started typing, analysing the shape of the abrasion to figure out from which direction it had been created.

"Empress, there are rumours of sea serpents that can grow to twice the length of the undead octopus you defeated so decisively. However, when judging by volume, the latter might still count as the larger of the two." Some of the eagerness disappeared from Torian's dream-like voice. "Unfortunately, the depths of the ocean are not a

well-researched topic; there may yet be larger creatures completely unknown to us."

"Thank you." Ami shuddered at the memory of the eight-armed monster and compared its size to the abrasion. Such a beast could have created it, if it had bumped against the slope fairly solidly. "*I'm going after it,"* she decided.

"Excuse me? Our crystal balls cannot see in the dark, your Imperial Majesty," Torian reminded her.

Ami reconfigured the sensors of the remote visor. Scanning only for objects the size of a giant octopus and upwards would vastly increase its detection range, at the cost of missing smaller details. *"Some kind of giant creature passed through here. If it was responsible for the lights you observed, then it shouldn't have too much of a lead,"* she explained.

Deep below, the probe shot forward with a speed it hadn't demonstrated before as the young Keeper shoved it much more forcefully through the water.

Ami teleported from one towering cloud to the next, taking care to stay hidden while following her probe. By now, she had draped a conjured woollen mantle over herself and added a scarf to her outfit; she had been freezing in her leg-baring senshi uniform. However, she no longer noticed the cold that made her breath condense in the air before her. All the attention she could spare was on a slow-moving red dot on the Mercury computer's screen. "Impossible!" She didn't have a visual yet, but the incoming sensor data was enough to make her gape at the readout in disbelief.

The target was enormous, easily dwarfing even the zombie octopus. She shook her head. Forget about the octopus. This thing read as big enough to house several container ships with room to spare! The teenager wondered how something that big could hold together, let alone manoeuvre under its own power. Her apprehension, as well as her curiosity, grew the closer her probe got to the source of the signal.

She pushed the automaton forward as fast as she could, encountering less and less fish swarms as she got closer to her quarry.

It still took several minutes until the device transmitted its first monochromatic image of the target.

"You were right," she thought in Torian's direction, blinking several times as she gazed at the picture, *"It does look as if a piece of the night sky had fallen into the water."*

"Where should we scry for it, your Majesty?" The warlock replied, a hint of his satisfaction and curiosity contaminating his telepathic message.

"From my position, move in a straight line about sixteen dot seven degrees from the North. It's about halfway between the top and the bottom of the trench." Ami sent the probe forward more slowly than before and had it stay close to the ground. She resumed looking at the picture of the clearly artificial target. Its shape reminded her a bit of a jellyfish, with a domed top part and a narrow stalk that trailed long tendrils. Admittedly, the comparison was somewhat flawed, since the top was more of a staggered pyramid and the tendrils didn't trail, but were wound tightly around the tapering stalk. Perhaps a mushroom would be a more apt comparison?

"We can see some light if we scry from a distance," Torian intruded into her thoughts. *"Nothing from the top, and if we move the vantage point too close, the image goes dark. You clearly found some sort of dark temple, your Majesty. I trust you will proceed with all due prudence."*

Ami didn't need the warning. She wasn't going to take risks approaching an enemy stronghold like that one. Given the sheer scale of the underwater vessel, it had to be important to Crowned Death. With that size, she would be justified called it floating city. Perhaps she was even looking at the death god's main temple? She had no doubt that the construct was capable of housing the power source of the Calarine staves. *"I'm not personally getting any closer to that thing if I can help it,"* she messaged back.

More and more of the vessel filled her screen as her probe crept closer. The pinpricks of light visible from afar seemed to be openings in its surface. Windows or doors perhaps? Ami studied the hull constructed from black stone. She would have expected something travelling through the ocean to be covered in algae or mussels, but no discolourations hinted at any such passengers. Her gaze moved downwards, toward the appendages hanging down from the octagonal main mass and clinging to the stem.

The teenager gasped and covered her mouth with one hand. They were made of corpses! Large and small squids, crustaceans, and fishes were holding onto each other, forming fleshy tendrils that drifted limply in the current.

Ami forced herself to study the macabre sight more closely. She could discern fatal wounds on some of the larger bodies, but couldn't find any signs of decomposition. Some of those corpses looked ancient too, all dark and wrinkly and mummified. The temple was dragging its own army of undead monsters along!

Even more cautious now, Ami circled the gargantuan vessel with her camera drone. Approaching in a spiral pattern, she got a good look at the upper side of the dome. Obelisks studded its surface like beard stubble, flanking paths, terraces and jutting towers. Of more immediate interest to her were the crenellations, worn smooth over time by the flowing water. They wouldn't make much sense unless this thing could actually surface. Ami suddenly felt a lot less comfortable about having built her dungeon close to the coast. *"Torian, get someone to compile me a list of recent and historical references to a black fortress rising from the sea,"* she instructed.

"Err, of course, your Majesty. Immediately. I take it your exploration is going well?"

"I'm not seeing much from the outside." While her scanner provided her with some information about the general magical signature of the temple-ship, she'd have to get inside to learn anything useful. For example, she would love to know where all the magic that the ship was using for propulsion was coming from. The amount required was far in excess of anything she could produce without dipping deeply into her gold reserves.

She considered the implications of her probe falling into enemy hands. Aside from the visor, nothing inside was particularly advanced. Dungeon traps already could produce electricity, so her batteries were nothing new. The motor was a bit more problematic, but didn't introduce anything that couldn't also be accomplished by magic already. If worst came to worst, she could simply dispell the sensor goggles by possessing the shark again and cancelling her Sailor Mercury transformation. Nodding to herself, she let the probe sink lower so it could get to one of the lit openings on the temple's underside. It was worth the risk.

As the automaton got closer to the edge of the claimed area, it became harder and harder to move with Ami's Keeper powers. She wished she had included one of her rats as a passenger. The camera feed alone didn't give her a precise enough idea of the probe's location to cast spells at it. A telekinetic Keeper hand would have been just what she needed in this situation. Instead, she reached inside the device and flicked the power switch before her control slipped entirely. With a faint vibration, the motor started up. From now on, she'd have to drive by remote control, making an already complicated task even harder.

Acutely aware that she was on a time limit, Ami had the probe head for one of the more isolated openings. It stayed far away from the grotesque tendrils and hid between pieces of wall-like protruding masonry. Just as it approached its destination, something emerged from the rectangular hatch, and Ami let out a startled hiss. Biting her lip, she swerved to the side and stopped the motor, already resigned to the fact that inertia was working against her and that she'd never reach a hiding spot in time.

Snout first, a deathly pale shark descended out of the opening, carrying a metal-coated skeleton that glittered in the shaft of light.

Ami's heart hammered in her chest as mount and rider completely ignored the floating cylinder not five metres to their side. Couldn't they detect it?

Apparently not. The shark swam off, dragging a pallet laden with black stone plates on a chain. Its rider turned its head, cones of light shining from its hollow eye sockets. Its gaze wandered over the

vessel's hull, illuminating parts of it like a spotlight.

Ami waited for them to disappear behind a wall and wiped the sweat from her brow. What had happened here? She considered the facts. First, her probe wasn't alive. Second, it only used active magic for communication. Third, it had stayed in the dark. Was it possible that undead couldn't see in complete darkness? It would explain the lights. Not questioning her luck, she had the probe press onwards. It's batteries wouldn't get any fuller from waiting. She concentrated entirely on her task and managed to steer the device into the narrow passage with the first try.

The Mercury computer howled a warning, and Ami jerked in surprise.

Wide-eyed, she stared at the red letters flashing on the screen. They ordered her to turn back right this moment, since she was heading into a field of lethal magical energies. Since the message was meant for her probe, she felt free to ignore it. Perhaps it was for the best that she hadn't placed an animal into the device, after all.

Calming down after both unpleasant surprises, she got her first uninterrupted look at the temple's insides. They were filled with water, reducing sight range despite the adequate illumination. Nevertheless, Ami would have had to be blind to miss that the corridor was more elaborately decorated than the temple's austere exterior. Unfortunately, she found neither the skull motives on the wall nor the giant gaping maw that formed a doorway to be in good taste. She hurriedly steered the probe forward, searching for some place where it would have more cover.

It passed in between two larger-than-life statues of skeletal kings staring at each other and emerged into a larger chamber.

The horrible face of the Incarnation of Extinction covered the ceiling, its left nostril providing just enough space for the probe to hide from a group of metal-coated skeletons that emerged from a side chamber, carrying shiny rocks.

A quick scan taught Ami that it was gold ore. She briefly wondered what need the undead had for it, but put the thought aside for the

moment. It was more important to get her little mechanical spy deeper into the fortress while its power lasted. Only one collision with the wall later, she had managed to get the drone into the next corridor.

The place's décor consisted of nothing but skulls, piled across each other and sorted meticulously by size until they covered every available surface.

They were real too, Ami thought with revulsion. At the next intersection, she could see more tunnels branching off. She wondered just how long these catacomb-like corridors were, and if they were all stuffed with mortal remains.

Since she didn't have any kind of map, she was forced to rely on the information relayed by her sensors instead. She opted to head for the strongest energy sources she could detect, reasoning that doing so would lead her to something important eventually. She kept following the maze-like tunnels, staying close to the ceiling to avoid running into patrols and workers.

Her prudence was well-justified, since another group of the metal-coated skeletons threw long shadows down the corridor as they approached. Ami kept her spy motionless, hoping that the light of the green spheres set into the walls didn't reach it. She needn't have worried, as the procession of skeletons passed underneath without ever looking up. The probe's elevated vantage point also gave her a great view of the bier carried by the undead. More separate bones, but this time coated with a thin film of metal. Replacement parts for Crowned Death's soldiers?

The corridor took a sharp turn to the left and widened. It gave her more room to manoeuvre, and she gratefully took advantage of the shadows along the ceiling to hide from the fifty or so skeletons that were working the walls with hammers and chisels. She wasn't too far away from some of the energy sources now.

As she plotted a new course, a change went through the room, and her luck ran out. A large section of the wall slid aside, the undead workers threw themselves to the ground in supplication, and her camera feed dissolved into static as the Incarnation of Extinction

stared straight at the probe.

Ami boggled and looked at her screen in dismay, hoping against hope that the "connection lost" messages were only a hallucination. She was shocked less by the sight of her defeated enemy - Crowned Death could probably make a new Incarnation whenever he wanted to - than by what the evil spirit had been able to do. Her probe wasn't even alive! It made no sense that it should have been affected by the death gaze! In her frustration, she almost missed the small, blinking line of text in the corner of the screen. It simply stated "periphery device rebooting..."

"Please work..." she whispered as she waited impatiently for the remote visor to come back online. Perhaps the probe could run and hide if the enemy believed it out of action?

Finally, the picture returned and immediately dashed her hopes. It swerved up and down as the probe moved, caught in the grip of the Incarnation.

The semi-transparent abomination was moving at a brisk pace, carrying the trapped device in a third arm it had grown specifically for that purpose. In contrast to Ami, it navigated the labyrinthine corridors with expert ease, but the shaking of the camera made it hard for her to catch more than the occasional glimpse of rooms filled with tightly-stacked skeletons.

Nevertheless, Ami recorded everything that got into the visor's field of view. She didn't know when the Incarnation would realise that the probe wasn't as dead as it assumed. Until it did, she was going to save as much footage as possible.

When the Incarnation of Extinction entered a vast hollow space within the vessel, Ami got to see more of the surroundings despite the camera swings. In what had to be the centre of the ship, she spotted a ziggurat-like structure that looked incongruous with the surrounding architecture, stylistically as well as due to the brighter stone used in its construction.

A curtain of bubbles blocked her view before she could make more than a preliminary analysis. The bubbles seemed to come from a

row of egg-shaped buildings that were hot enough to make the surrounding water boil. At a guess, they were hollow and served as smithies.

The Incarnation crossed an overpass, turning slightly and providing Ami with another look at the central building.

This time, she noticed the pipes converging on the structure from all directions. Each of them began at a cylinder of dark stone about twenty metres in diameter and twice as tall. What really grabbed her attention was the readout of her sensors. Each power reading, aside from her probe's captor, seemed to originate within one of those black columns. She could barely contain her excitement when the Incarnation headed straight for an unfinished one, over which skeletal workers swarmed like ones.

Work came to a quick stop as the demonic being approached and the undead prostrated themselves before it. It ignored them and stepped through the entrance, and for a moment, Ami saw nothing but the hole where the ceiling of the bunker-like building was going to be. Then, the camera swerved much more violently than before, and she realised that the Incarnation had tossed her automaton towards a trio of kneeling skeletons. The many pockets of their tattered robes contained complicated-looking instruments and wands, she noted in the brief moment they were within view. However, she forgot all about the sorcerer-engineers as the probe continued spinning slowly in the water.

A man was trapped in a spherical bubble of air, screaming soundlessly as a death priest flayed skin off his back with a lash of dark magic.

Ami got the impression that she had seen the tortured stranger before, but even his gruesome fate was not enough to distract Ami from what was in the pit below him. She finally had the answer to one of her questions.

Grey and dead, its fleshy membrane ripped apart and savaged, the bloody ruin of a dungeon heart nevertheless beat in a steady rhythm.

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Spreading the News

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"...and then they started taking the probe apart," Ami said as the playback ended. Clad in her best Keeper outfit, she looked expectantly at her audience like a student waiting for the verdict of her professors,

Abbot Durval furrowed his brow as he stared at the canvas, his wrinkles more prominent than usual. If he had leaned forward any further, he would have been in serious risk of falling off his bench.

In contrast, Camilla sat next to him at the corner table with a very straight back and a minimum amount of fidgeting. From time to time, she threw an awestruck glance at the impassive face of the Avatar in the crystal ball before her. When neither of the other two was looking at her, she tried to straighten out an imaginary wrinkle in her ambassadorial robes.

Ami wondered briefly whether the blonde was pale and nervous for the right reasons.

Her own advisers at their separate table seemed less impressed by the footage than her visitors, since all aside from Jered had seen it before. Tiger in particular was paying more attention to the snacks than to the presentation, her appetite undiminished by Jadeite's disapproving stares.

"That is a shocking discovery," Durval spoke first, shaking his head. "Undead dungeon hearts, Light preserve us all!"

"It's alarming news indeed," Amadeus agreed. "It looks as if someone got inspired by your iceberg, doesn't it?" he asked, directing a dark look at Ami.

"With all due respect, it has to be far older than her Majesty's design," Snyder came to Ami's defence. He was sitting closest to the group of visitors, but addressed his words mostly at the Avatar. "The

sizeable amount of skeletons indicates that the death god has been gathering these minions for a long time. The metal coating for preserving and strengthening the bones supports this interpretation, as does the wear on the fortress' crenellations."

Amadeus inclined his head in a barely perceptible nod, and turned toward Ami. "Are you still tracking that vessel?" he asked in a more business-like tone of voice.

Ami nodded. "Yes. It changed course after they capture my probe, but I sent down replacements to keep it under observation." Which meant in practice that she had hidden two visors on the enemy vessel's hull. She hoped that she wouldn't need the power committed to maintaining two more transformations any time soon.

"Good. Do you know where is it going?"

"It seems to let itself drift on the currents most of the time, but I haven't been following its movements for more than a few hours yet."

"Continue monitoring it!" the Avatar ordered, causing Durval to look at him sideways and Camilla to suck in a startled breath.

The fairy's eyes darted over to Mercury, and she slid further away from the crystal ball hurriedly.

Fortunately, Ami didn't take offence. "I was intending to," she said. "Do you have a plan on how to deal with that thing, then?" she asked, hope swinging in her voice. "With its ability to move unseen and its horde of aquatic abominations, it represents a terrible danger to shipping and to coastal settlements."

"I dare disagree with that assessment," Durval corrected her. "It's too big. It would beach itself long before reaching most shores."

"Actually, the undead sea creatures could serve as ferries," Ami pointed out.

The abbot twirled his white beard around his index finger as he considered this. "Hmm, so they could." He sat down more comfortably. "Nevertheless, a fleet of smaller, faster vessels would

be more suitable for raids. If this thing attacked a city, its neighbours would be warned long before it reached the next one."

"If it can't fly," Jadeite stated in a flat tone of voice. "Remember the death priests and their pet?"

"Um, if our enemy had enough of those to lift something that heavy, we would have never managed to stop the sacrifice," Ami said into the sudden silence, bringing some confidence back onto the faces looking at her.

"Well, it sounds as if the vessel would be best suited for establishing a beachhead in hostile territory or for achieving naval dominance, then," Cathy said. "If it sent its zombie critters roaming, it could sink enemy ships in a wide perimeter around itself."

"A major headache on a strategic level, but it's not exactly going to bring nations to their knees by itself." Jered was leaning against Cathy and occasionally perusing her notes. The wavy-haired man had dark rings under his eyes, and the sleeves of his shirt had slight scorch marks from the summoning circle Ami had used to retrieve him in a hurry.

"Well, *I'm* still worried plenty about those possibilities!" Camilla spoke up for the first time, almost snarling at the man.

"The vessel's offensive capabilities are irrelevant in the big picture," the Avatar said in a voice not his own, his eyes glowing white.

Round-eyed, the fairy flinched and bowed her head even as her cheeks started reddening. "Um, I-"

"That was not meant as an admonishment, child. You are simply not taking Crowned Death's objectives into account."

Camilla's chagrined expression brightened. Like everyone else, she waited for the Light's next words with bated breath.

"The important part is that Crowned Death can act in this world without intermediaries. With the undead dungeon hearts, he has no more need for Keepers who squander their resources on their own selfish goals. He is undoubtedly using the vessel to collect enough

power to erupt into this world."

Ami's heart skipped a beat.

Camilla reeled as if slapped, Durval coughed in surprise, and a chorus of gasps came from Ami's advisers.

"I need to contact my superiors!"

"This is a disaster! What-"

"We need to stop him!"

"What are you planning to-"

"How long-"

"Please sit down and be quiet," the gender-neutral voice of the Light thundered over the noise of everyone talking at once. "There is no cause for alarm just yet," it filled the sudden silence. "Crowned Death's stealthy approach has a significant drawback. Imagine Keeper-corrupted lands as a hole through which a dark god may wriggle into this world. The smaller the hole, the more effort it takes for the entity to squeeze through. Crowned Death's swimming temple barely qualifies as a pinprick. He will have to gather power for a long time."

"Sounds as if a huge wasteland ruled by the undead would have fit right into his plans, then," Tiger interrupted. "Gather enough power, then have your priests approach a certain vampire with the offer of gold in exchange for a service..."

"It does make you wonder how much of Mukrezar's fall was his own fault, doesn't it?" Jered said, his eyes half-closed.

A low growl echoed through the room, and Camilla looked around for its source, startled. When she spotted the Avatar grinding his teeth, her eyes widened, and a frown struggled for predominance with a raised eyebrow.

Worried, Ami typed away at her Mercury computer. "Could the death god have claimed the bottom of the sea to open a large enough

entrance?" she asked, looking at the Avatar.

Within the crystal ball, the man's angry features calmed as the warm light returned to his eyes. "That would do him no good. The moving water would carry away too much of the corruption for this to work," the Light gods explained. Forestalling her next question, the voice continued "He could not use your territory either, unless you suddenly started worshipping him for some reason."

"That is never going to happen," Ami said with conviction.

"How fortunate," Durval noted. "However, there are many other regions that are both above ground and poorly guarded, such as deserts and the polar ice caps. I shall recommend to his Majesty King Albrecht that he and his allies commence surveys of such areas."

"That's, er, probably a good idea," Ami agreed with some apprehension. Since she had a hideout in the northern Arctic circle, she wasn't entirely happy about the suggestion.

"How much time do we have?" Jadeite asked.

"If it helps, my information suggests that he has between twenty to thirty undead dungeon hearts active on that ship," Ami added quickly, drawing a startled gasp from her guests. "I can't tell how much power he has already gathered, though."

"Less than a third of what he needs to enter the world without a prepared territory, if her," the Avatar's white-glowing eyes briefly shifted toward Tiger, "speculation is correct. It should take him decades to gather the rest, at the very least."

"Well, that's a relief." Durval seemed to shrink as the tension left his old body and he sank into a more comfortable position on his bench.

Ami, however, was typing away furiously on her palmtop computer. "Does this take into account him mining the ocean floor for gold? And what if he adds more dungeon hearts?"

"He doesn't have enough gold in that damn temple of his to make much of a difference," Amadeus replied in his own voice. "I can tell

by it not being embedded in the ocean ground like a lead weight."

"I shall take your word for it, Lord Avatar," Durval said, and then turned to Ami. "I imagine that finding salvageable dungeon hearts is harder than it sounds. Keepers tend to claim and re-purpose the dungeon heart chambers of their defeated opponents, and we consider the sight of such an artefact burning to be rather heart-warming."

Ami didn't let herself be distracted by Cathy's groan and the old man's grin. "Well, what if he simply empowers more Keepers and has them killed to steal their hearts?"

"Expensive, and potential Keepers don't grow on trees," the Avatar commented.

"All right," Ami nodded. "So everyone agrees that Crowned Death is trying to play the long game here, and his swimming fortress is not a pressing threat?" She looked at Durval and the Avatar, since they seemed the closest she had to experts in this room.

"It will take him decades to get ready, in my opinion. Years at the very least," the abbot said.

"Nevertheless," the Light's clear voice echoed through the room like the sound of a bell, "He must be stopped. The faster, the better."

"I will do what is within my power, exalted Divines," Durval agreed, bowing deeply.

Camilla followed his lead after an instant. She blinked when she looked over at the other table and saw that Jadeite hadn't.

"Oh, I agree completely," Ami said with a small smile.

"Nobody in his right mind would have any objections," Jered said. "And I'm sure even most Keepers would cooperate to get rid of that swimming doomsday clock. At least, they wouldn't get in the way."

"Are you suggesting that we should work together with other Keepers on this?" the Avatar growled.

Camilla leaned in close to Durval and indicated Mercury with a glance. "He's objecting about working with Keepers *now*?" she whispered quietly, sounding confused.

Amadeus' smouldering gaze swivelled from Jered to her. "What was that, Ambassador?"

"Nothing!" the fairy squeaked, hanging her head.

"Well, we already know of one Keeper who is currently at war with the priesthood of Crowned Death," Jadeite said. He looked at Ami expectantly. "One who seems competent enough, and is already trying to get into your good graces."

"I don't know," Ami said. Making use of Midori's resources would be strategically sound, but she felt filthy even thinking about working together with someone as evil as most Keepers. Her feelings on the issue mirrored the Avatar's. "Let's first try to find a solution that doesn't involve them, all right?"

"Yeah, how hard could it be to destroy a dark temple deep underwater? It only has dungeon-grade structural reinforcements, invisible zones of killing magic, monsters outside, skeletons inside, and a Death aspect roaming the halls. Piece of cake," Cathy summarised the obstacles and let out a long sigh.

"It's a fortress meant to protect Crowned Death's most critical assets," Tiger said. "Of course it's going to be a pain to attack! Does anyone have any ideas on where to even begin?"

"Before we start planning, I'd like to know why Mercury was poking around in the middle of the ocean in the first place," Amadeus said.

"Oh, that? I was trying to find the power source of the battle staves of Calarine that those death priests are using," Ami explained.

"I surmise that you succeeded, Empress," Durval said.

The Avatar's eyes turned white. "The building that is the recipient of all those pipes is built in the style of ancient Calarine," the Light confirmed.

"All right! We can hit our original objective and ruin the death gods plan as a bonus! Lucky!" Tiger declared cheerfully and slammed her palm onto the table. The empty snack bowl next to her hand clattered from the impact.

"Tiger..." Ami said softly, wringing her hands. The youma hadn't exactly breached the non-existant protocol, but the young Keeper couldn't help feel slightly embarrassed by her adopted sister's unrefined behaviour. Couldn't she see that this was a somewhat official occasion, with high-ranking visitors and at least one dark general in the room?

"What? At least one of us has to be positive! You are all as glum as if you were attending a funeral!"

The Light ignored the byplay. "Disabling the Calarine staves should greatly hamper the ability of his slaves to recover dead dungeon hearts. Without them, they will not have enough power to teleport with the pieces."

"Good," Ami was glad to hear that a success here would be crippling to the dark god's efforts, "but we still need a plan to bring that temple down." Her expectant gaze rested on the Avatar.

Amadeus raised an eyebrow. "What are you looking at me for? Do you expecting me to swim down there and tear it apart by myself?"

"Err, I was hoping for some suggestion from either you or the Light," the blue-haired girl admitted.

"Not at this time," the short-bearded man replied. "Besides, you are the one famous for her devious plans."

"I may need some help with this one," Ami admitted freely. "The sheer scale of that ship and its inaccessible location limit my options a lot."

"Same for us," Durval stated. "What about you, Ambassador?" he asked the fairy sitting to his left.

Camilla scratched the back of her head. "Sorry, but I don't exactly have the security clearance to know all about the Empire's heavy-

duty attack magic. It would be hard to target something that deep underneath the waves, though."

"The visibility problem could be partially remedied with strong light spells," Ami thought out loud. "If we don't mind alerting the target about the incoming attack."

"Which leaves the problem of getting close enough to actually do some damage. Not everyone has the luxury of being able to throw any spells at long ranges," the fairy pointed out. "Any ship getting that close would be committing suicide by undead sea monster."

Ami thought about that for a moment. "My airships can bypass those easily enough."

Durval crossed his arms. "You cannot reasonably expect the Light-aligned forces to willingly travel on a Keeper's flying transport. If you want us to use devices like that, you will have to release the construction plans to us," the abbot said sternly.

"Well, that's-"

"Something her Majesty is going to think long and hard about," Jered interrupted, standing up. "We are not pressed for time here."

Ami closed her mouth, surprised and a little annoyed. Still, the wavy-haired man had a point. This wasn't a decision to be made lightly. She'd have to carefully consider who would profit most from the introduction of that technology. After a moment of silence, she nodded in Jered's direction. "Yes. Let us explore other possibilities first."

"What about brute force?" Camilla suggested, sounding slightly disappointed. "Could Empress Mercury just blast the temple with spells until it's riddled with holes?"

"It's already full of water," Tiger drawled with a hostile look towards the winged girl. "A few more holes won't make it sink."

"Aside from that, the vessel is also going to be almost impervious to damage if it is reinforced with the same magic as dungeon heart walls. And I see no reason why it wouldn't be," Ami elaborated,

shaking her head.

"That's not a problem that can't be overcome by simply using *more* force," the Avatar stated.

"I don't have a way to apply that much force underwater," Ami stated blandly. "Well, unless Crowned Death was kind enough to let me pile up a giant heap of explosives in the path of his vessel and didn't take evasive action."

"What about simply letting the water supply the force?" Cathy suggested, spreading her arms. "Get a bunch of wizards to all summon some water out of the temple at the same time, and," she clapped her hands together, "squish! Nobody would even have to get close to the temple!"

"We could get together enough magicians for this task," the Light stated, speaking through the Avatar, "but such an attempt would be blindingly obvious and easily evaded unless the target was rendered immobile beforehand." The glowing white eyes in the crystal ball focused on Ami, as if expecting her to come up with a solution.

"Maybe ice?" The teenager blurted out. "No, there's no way I can produce enough to trap something that big."

Durval's face brightened suddenly."Lord Avatar, could the elves use their dragon-crashing spell for this?"

"No. It couldn't pierce the water."

"Well, then I am all out of ideas," the old man said and proceeded to adjust the cushion he was sitting on.

The room fell quiet as its occupants tried to come up with ideas. Finally, Jered raised his head. "How about a more insidious approach? Poison won't work on the undead, but what about holy water?"

"Any amount of holy water we could produce would literally just be a drop in the ocean before it gets to the right depth," the Avatar said.

"What if I freeze it first?" Ami asked.

"Hmm." The Avatar tugged at his short beard absently. "That could work. It's not going to do much damage on its own, though."

"Well, I like the idea of harpooning undead sea monsters with spears of holy water," Jadeite said with a smile, which Ami returned.

"Okay, so we have one plan that could maybe work. A bit. On secondary targets," Tiger said. "So, since the direct approach isn't looking great, how about sabotage to make the stupid thing hold still long enough?"

"If you have a plan on how to get past the death fields, the undead, and the Incarnation, let's hear it," Jadeite stated with a frown.

"Well, what about that guy they are torturing? He's already inside and might be able to help if he was freed. Just get another probe inside and use it for aiming!"

"Who is he, anyway?" Jered wanted to know.

Ami rewound the recording. "We aren't sure."

Camilla blinked several times as the pictures on the screen moved backwards before they froze completely.

"Wait, go forward again," Cathy requested. "Stop. He's got his eyes open in that frame," she said, pointing at the figure writhing in pain.

"A Keeper," Durval observed as he spotted the red glow. The muscles around his mouth lost their tension as his sympathy visibly melted away.

"My best guess I that this Keeper Clairmonte, then," Ami said. "I only saw him for an instant when he got sucked into his destroyed dungeon heart, but the overall build and height would fit."

"Makes sense," Cathy agreed. "I'm sure Crowned Death was positively delighted about his performance defending the Mantle."

None of Ami's guests seemed inclined to comment, though the Avatar's face briefly twisted into a mask of anger.

"All right, so he's someone whose fate we don't give a damn about," Jered said.

Ami couldn't help but agree with him, even if her vicious satisfaction at seeing the eye-gouging monster reduced to this state made her feel ashamed.

"The question is: can we use him?" the brown-haired man continued.

"Or at least kill him?" Camilla wanted to know. She was openly scowling at the picture, an expression her rounded features were ill-suited for.

The young woman had helped treat the Keeper's victims, Ami remembered. "I think we could contact him telepathically, but I don't know what he could do for us right now." Looking at Camilla, she said "He is unlikely to survive the destruction of the ship in any case."

"If that really is Clairmonte, then I should get someone to attack his remaining territories," the Avatar commented. "That would serve the villain right."

"Right. No significant progress on the sabotage idea, then," Jered said as he took a note. "Unless someone has something to add?"

"Perhaps. Empress Mercury, could your metal golems board the enemy vessel?" Durval asked. "To me, it seems as if they would be able to deal well with the various hazards within the temple."

"They can't swim," Ami replied. Her reaperbots would also be blind on the unholy ground, since their eyes were based on crystal balls.

"I see. That would indeed make their use underwater difficult."

"Ahem, I may have an idea," Snyder spoke up.

Ami had almost forgotten the redhead's presence, since he had been so quiet all throughout the discussion. "Yes?"

"We could use a ward. Since the enemy vessel is only kept afloat by

active magic, it would sink like a rock if it was brought into contact with a strong enough mana-draining ward."

"A sound plan in theory, Acolyte," Durval said. "In practice, a ward large enough to drain the mana from several dozen dungeon hearts at once, without being blasted into oblivion by the energies involved... well, it would rival the floating temple in size."

"Too big to finish anywhere near the enemy ship while it's still there, too heavy to manoeuvre," Camilla evaluated the plan. "Wait, what if- no, anti-magical ward. Can't transform it into something else."

"I think we shouldn't dismiss this option yet," Ami contradicted. Her fingers were tapping the keys of her palmtop rapidly. "The surrounding water would provide some cooling, reducing the overall size required. If... hmmm..." She trailed off as she ran the numbers and considered lifting gases, pressures, and temperatures.

Around her, the room fell quiet as the others watched her work.

She stopped typing and turned to the crystal ball. "How many wizards would be available for action against Crowned Death's ship?"

"With sufficient advance warning, We could count on the cooperation of almost every magic user who worships Us," the Light replied with a curious undertone.

"Then it could be possible!" Ami stated. She was so excited about having found a possible solution she didn't even feel intimidated by everyone staring at her. "The ward can be prepared in separate pieces and locations and sent to me by the wizards. I'll simply weld it together right in the temple's path!"

"Technically feasible with some preparation of the receiving area, but difficult to coordinate," the Light gods' voice came from the crystal ball. "How are you going to get the heavy ward off the ocean floor?"

"It's not going to be anywhere near as massive as the floating temple," Ami explained. "For one, it's flat. For the other, everything

that would just be empty space in the design can be cut out to save weight. Here, see." She walked over to the crystal ball and turned her computer so that the Avatar could see the screen.

On the display, a design that looked only somewhat more substantial than a spider web spun slowly in between a sea of numbers.

"Cutting away most of the superfluous material of the disc will eliminate about nine tenths of the weight," Ami said. "I'll be able to lift the ward to the right height by attaching enough lighter-than-water materials to it."

"And since it is completely passive until it makes contact, the vessel may not spot it in the darkness until it is too late," the Light gods predicted the next part of her plan. "This course of action is the most viable so far. We agree with it."

The white glow disappeared from Amadeus' eyes. "'Viable' doesn't mean 'likely to succeed'. I hope you will amend and improve your idea while the other kingdoms discuss the issue and come up with their own solutions." His face in the crystal ball swivelled to Ami's guests. "Abbot Durval, Ambassador Camilla, I expect you to bring this to the attention of your superiors."

The fairy bowed formally. "Of course, Lord Avatar."

"Empress, I will be taking my leave now. I have Keepers to hunt."

"Lord Avatar, wait!" Camilla called out, looking surprised at her own audacity. "Please, I have a question! The underground tower Empress Mercury took from Zarekos - is it dangerous?"

"The what? Oh, you mean the room with the big statue." The Avatar closed his eyes as if conversing with himself. When he opened them again, they shone in a solid white tone. "To answer your real question, the towers of the Shining Concord Empire were built with Our permission. We have not been given reason to regret that decision yet. We will not go into further detail, because Empress Mercury has a knack for finding creative and distressing applications for things she understands."

Ami, who had indeed been listening in curiously, didn't know if she should take this as an insult or a compliment.

"Thank you, honoured Divines! Lord Avatar!" the blonde fairy blurted out, beaming as she bowed so deeply to the crystal ball that her head almost disappeared underneath the table. When she game back up, the sphere was black.

"I think that concludes our meeting," Ami said. "Thank you all for attending. I will let you all tend to your respective duties now."

While Ami wandered through her library, searching the towering shelves for books on transfiguration techniques, she was approached by a figure in an elaborate purple robe.

"My Empress! I have just finished perusing the records of your recent meeting. May I offer a potentially helpful suggestion?" Torian said. His teeth gleamed white as he smiled and gestured invitingly toward a pedestal.

"Go right ahead." Ami walked over to the thin book he had indicated, trying to decipher the scribbles that covered the open pages.

"This is my own original work, something I was working on before I got distracted by worthier pursuits," the warlock explained. "It was intended as an ironic spell to use against vampires, horrible things that they are. In light of our current situation, I thought it might open up new avenues for the discarded sabotage plans."

Ami squinted as she tried to decipher the atrocious handwriting. Some passages reminded her strongly of the more objectionable tomes in her library. "Some kind of necromancy spell?" she guessed as she glanced up at the taller man.

"Indeed. Its working title is 'Dominate Vampire', though I would like it to be known as something along the lines of 'Torian's Terrific Vampire Tamer' once it is perfected."

"You have a spell to seize control of an undead creature?"

"Not exactly." Torian adjusted his collar and put on his most winning smile. "It is limited to vampires for the moment and still not quite done, but it provides a strong foundation on which to build! I am sure that with a team of dedicated warlocks and sufficient funding, it could be expanded in scope in no time!"

Ami closed the booklet. "I'm not sure controlling an undead creature, or even several, would be of much value." Anything up to and including a giant octopus would be of limited use. Hmm, did the Incarnation of Extinction qualify as an undead? Yeah right, as if *that* would ever work! "It could perhaps be useful for scouting purposes, but-" Her crimson eyes suddenly widened as a new idea hit her. "You'll have your research team!"

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Outside Perspectives

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King Albrecht massaged his temples, wrinkling his forehead as if in pain. "My dear Durval, I find it amazing how news from the Avatar Islands manages to instill mind-numbing terror without fail. First, a Keeper strong enough to beat the Avatar with mantle appears, and now a dark god is preparing the end of the world."

Durval, sitting in a comfortable wooden armchair, chuckled into his beard. "Oh, be fair. This is hardly an issue that is native to that continent. Not that it detracts from the seriousness of the situation."

"Indeed." The spymaster agreed, lurking behind the king like a grey shadow. Surrounded by the temple's white marble surfaces, he stood out almost as much as the monarch in his bright purple mantle. "I gather that you discussed potential solutions with Empress Mercury?"

"So I did," the old abbot said. He looked left and right, as if checking for the unlikely possibility that someone was listening in on them in this holy place. "It is of the utmost importance that none of the details are leaked to the agents of Crowned Death, since the plan relies on catching the target unaware."

"I see. That would explain why you insisted on meeting here. Now, what can you tell us-"

"Spymaster, please." Albrecht held up his hand. "I am, for the moment, more interested in whether or not my old friend is well. What was the Empress' hospitality like?" he asked, leaning forward in his seat.

"Mercury did not treat me badly, if you are worried about that," Durval said. "I cannot say that she was the perfect host, but that seems to be more ignorance of the correct etiquette than purposeful action."

"I'm relieved to hear that," Albrecht said with a smile. "I felt guilty every day for sending you there."

"Oh, I was relieved as well when I learned that she wanted me there for exactly the reason she stated. She seems to genuinely want her prisoners cured, and is treating them well."

"Ah yes, our missing citizens." Albrecht sighed. "Barely a day passes without one or more worried relatives demand that we organise a rescue effort. Having to disappoint them is getting so tiresome. They are becoming almost as bad as those young fools who want to attack the Avatar Islands and reinstate the Avatar as its rightful ruler."

"A movement that is gaining much support among the survivors of Mukrezar's campaign," the spymaster added.

"Yes, yes, no need to remind me," the King said, waving his hand in annoyance.

"I'll try to finish Mercury's potential cure for cursed wounds as quickly as possible then," Durval said, grinning wryly. "That should at least get the first problem out of your hair."

"She really has developed a cure like that?" Albrecht said, his eyes widening. "Her knowledge of the magical arts must be impressively vast."

"Oh, actually, I was surprised to learn that this is not the case, " the abbot contradicted. He twirled his beard around one finger absently. "She - spymaster, you may find this very useful - seems to depend mostly on a small artefact, which she consults regularly on various topics. I'm sure that she would be considerably weakened without it."

"An intriguing possibility," the man said through the cloth covering his mouth.

"We want her at her best until Crowned Death is stopped," the King reminded them. "Now, what was it she suggested we do about him?"

"Sisters!" Dandel called out as she stepped onto the sunlit deck, drawing only a passing glance from the other sailors. "It's a letter from Camilla!" she shouted, brandishing a rolled-up scroll.

"Eh? Really?" Tilia's upside-down face dropped into the indigo-haired fairy's field of view from above. The green-haired was hanging from a tow by her angled legs.

Wings hummed, and four slender figures clad in swimsuit-like white uniforms descended onto Dandel like a flock of starving pigeons upon a bread crumb.

"Let me see it!"

"What does she say?"

"Is she all right?"

"I haven't read it yet," the eldest of the fairy sisters said as she was crowded by her siblings."It just arrived in the summoning circle together with an official letter addressed to the Oracles. Now give me some room, please."

The other faeries relocated behind her as she unrolled the scroll, trying to peek over her shoulder.

"Roselle, stop flying! You are going to blow the letter out of my hands!"

"Aww, but I want to see!" The orange-haired girl zipped left and right, her glitter filling the air.

"Move," A gruff voice spoke up behind the group. "You are all blocking the way, girls! Some people are trying to work here!" Two sailors carrying a soaked roll of fabric on their bare shoulders glowered at them.

"Oh, sorry!" Dandel jumped, batted her wings, and headed for the ship's highest mast. "Let's relocate, sisters!" Moments later, she alighted on the crow's nest and rested her back against its railing.

Her sisters followed her and sat down on the sail's crossbar. The seagulls who had been there first protested loudly as they were chased from their perch.

Dandel briefly followed the birds with her eyes as they sailed through the air, out over the open ocean. They could fly freely, unlike poor Camilla who was currently trapped underground. Unable to contain her curiosity any longer, she re-opened the scroll. Raising her voice to make herself heard over the flapping of the wind-filled sails, the indigo-eyed fairy began reading aloud.

"Dear sisters,

How are you? I am alive and well. Today, Empress Mercury made me attend an important and scary meeting."

"She has to be so frightened all alone in that dungeon," Melissa said, her sapphire eyes gleaming wetly.

"It was so important that even the Avatar attended (in a crystal ball)!" Dandel continued.

"Ohhh. The Avatar himself? I'd like to see him too," Tilia commented with a smile.

"Why is the dark empress talking with the Avatar?" purple-haired Cerasse wondered. "Do you think she's trying to wring even more concessions out of him?"

"Why would she invite Camilla to something like that?" The emerald-eyed girl shot down that theory.

"Shush! I want to hear the rest!" Anise complained, clinging to the crow's nest like a monkey as she manoeuvred behind Dandel to catch a glimpse of the message.

"I even got to talk to him! I'm not allowed to tell you about the details until our superiors (who are not secretly evil)-"

"Wait, what?" the climbing redhead interrupted.

Dandel shrugged. "That's what Camilla has written here," she said.

"What kind of nonsense has that Keeper been filling her head with?" Tilia asked, frowning.

"Ahem." The eldest of the fairies raised the scroll *" - about the details until our superiors have read my report. Also, I'm trying to represent the Shining Concord Empire with dignity, but it's hard!"*

Cerasse snickered. "That sounds like her all right!"

"My books on protocol are completely useless, since Empress Mercury doesn't use any I can recognise. She even lets her advisers interrupt her! It's like walking on eggshells, since I have no idea what will offend her."

"Well, Mercury is a glorified Keeper. She probably doesn't even have a protocol. Why *would* someone like her know what's proper?" Cerasse said, nodding sagely.

"Yeah, Keepers change their codes of conduct at a whim so they can punish their underlings more," Melissa agreed. She paled. "Err, which isn't good for Camilla at all."

"I still don't know what to make of Jadeite (the dreamy blonde guy). On one hand, he didn't show respect to the Avatar, on the other, he managed to restore the eyes of all those people with cursed wounds! I still can't believe it!"

"He's that powerful?" Anise said, blinking rapidly.

"But healing like that should be good magic!" Melissa said, brushing with her fingers through her blue tresses in frustration. "Why is he loyal to Mercury?"

"Maybe he likes her?" Cerasse pondered.

"No, no, that can't be it!" Roselle protested, shaking her head rapidly. "Who would like a Keeper?"

"Girls, save the speculation for later," Dandel interrupted. *"There's also another visitor here in the dungeon; an abbot from the western lands. I haven't gotten the opportunity to talk to him much, even though he's also living here in the unfinished Embassy building. The*

Empress says she can't proceed with construction because she can't get some of the requested materials. My own room is really nice, though. Unfortunately, I can't use it right now because I'm currently hiding out with the abducted villagers." Dandel frowned and read faster *"That's because I kind of set the empress' sister on fire, and she seems the type to hold a grudge."*

"She did *what*?"

"Is she trying to get herself hurt?"

Dandel groaned. "Oh, Camilla, what trouble have you gotten yourself into now?"

"Wait, the dark empress has a sister?" Roselle asked.

"That's what the letter says," Anise confirmed. "And Camilla set her on fire. I'm not sure if I should be proud of her or call her a moron."

"Oh, I hope Mercury will respect her status enough to not do something horrible to her," Melissa said, shuddering.

"Quiet, there's more," Dandel said. *"She totally had it coming though, because she dragged me out of bed and..."* the fairy trailed off.

"And what?" Melissa's outraged exclamation was loud enough that some of the sailors on the deck looked up at her. "What did they do to our baby sister?"

"I- Is it so horrible you can't tell us? Oh, I can't listen!" Roselle clamped her hands over her ears and almost fell of her perch when a sudden gust of wind buffeted her orange hair.

"That- that deviant monster! What did she do to her?"Anise demanded to know, her cheeks matching her eyes in colour.

"I don't know." Dandel turned over the scroll, revealing two blackened lines where she had been reading. "Someone has censored that part of the letter. Oh, and there's an annotation in a different handwriting." The fae stared at the much neater characters. *"This part was not factually correct and based on a*

misunderstanding. Nothing untoward was planned nor occurred," she read.

"Yeah, right, who'd believe that?" Tilia snorted.

"We need to get Camilla out of there!" Roselle said, garnering approving murmurs from her sisters.

Dandel herself was feeling very concerned for the young blonde and hurriedly read on. *"In any case, I showed her! By the way, Anise, you were correct about the imps. They are horribly annoying little things!"*

The redhead grinned triumphantly. "Told you so!"

"Anyway, it's surprisingly boring in the Embassy most of the time, so I spend most of my free time in the village of the abducted people. Did you know that Mercury built them an entire town underground? It's kind of weirdly regular, but not too bad once you get used to it."

"I'm glad she doesn't sound traumatised about the experience," Cerasse said.

"The food is good, but consists mostly of chicken. What I don't like is the weather here. When it's not raining, it's sleeting, and I can't go flying because my wings get wet and soggy in no time at all. Aside from that, this position isn't worse than any other we have had before. I miss you all.

Love, Camilla."

"We miss you too," Melissa said, and her sisters nodded.

"Wait, there's more!" Dandel told them. *"PS: I probably shouldn't have written about being bored, because Empress Mercury read my letter and 'suggested' that I could help teach in the school she has opened for the children. It passes time, but some of them are right little brats! I swear they are encouraging the imps!"*

"She's a schoolteacher now?" Tilia's brow furrowed in deep concentration before relaxing. "Nope, I can't imagine that, no matter how hard I try!"

"Don't be like that. She should be able to handle the course material for the smaller children just fine," Roselle reprimanded.

"This is good news," Cerasse said. "If Mercury is educating the children, then she doesn't want to eventually kill them."

"Do you think she is trying to raise herself a loyal population?" Dandel asked after pondering this for a moment.

"It's possible, if she is serious about wanting to be treated like a legitimate Empress. Adults will always have the fact that she's a Keeper in the back of their mind, but the children growing up there wouldn't know it was *wrong*!"

"Arrgh, I hate the thought of Camilla being all alone over there!" Anise said.

Melissa nodded rapidly. "Yeah, me too! I wish we could do something to help her! I worry about her. That letter just sounds..." she waved one hand in the air as she searched for the right words to describe her feelings.

"As if she isn't respecting the physical and spiritual dangers of her environment enough?" Dandel offered.

"Yes! Exactly! She could end up dead or corrupt at this rate!" the blue-haired fae agreed.

"If only she had never accepted that carpet when Mercury gave it to her!" Roselle muttered. "Sometimes I wonder if having a prestigious office is really worth the danger."

"But if she leaves, her career is over," Tilia said sadly. "She's bound to that place now.""I want to help her, but I don't know how! We can't do much while we are here!" Roselle exclaimed, flapping her wings as if she was about to lift off.

"Well, the embassy is going to need staff when it officially opens," Cerasse pondered, shifting uneasily. "We could volunteer to be stationed there. I'm sure we wouldn't have any competition."

"Obviously," Anise snorted. "Who'd want to be stationed in a place

like that?" She sighed. "Still, Camilla is stuck there." She met the eyes of her sisters. "Do we really want to do this?"

"She's family," Dandel stated, meet her sisters' eyes. "How is our little sister supposed to manage without us?"

"Well, I'm going to volunteer!" Melissa declared, clapping into her hands.

"Me too!" Anise agreed. "I can't leave the two of you without protection!"

Cerasse put one finger to her lip and looked at the clouds. "Hmm, I suppose being posted there would allow us to demand danger pay..." the purple-haired girl said airily. "I'm in."

"Oh, you don't have to pretend you are doing it for the money," Tilia said as she fluttered to the other fairy's side. "I'll come along, too. I wouldn't want to miss watching your tearful reunion - with the tentacle monster!" she teased.

"Hey! I'm doing this for Camilla!" Cerasse protested. "Though now that you mention it, it will be nice to have a capable opponent for board games again."

"Did you just compare us unfavourably to a tentacle monster?" Roselle asked, her hands on her waist.

"I certainly did." Cerasse pushed herself off the bar she was sitting on, dropping toward the deck before her dragonfly-like wings turned the fall into an elegant curve. "If you want to do something about it, you'll have to catch me first!"

"I'll chase you all the way to the Avatar Islands if I have to!" the orange-haired fairy called out as she gave chase.

Dandel's gaze followed the two as they darted through the salty-smelling air, zigzagging rapidly. She was proud of her sisters' willingness to brave mortal danger in order to help their younger sibling. "I will be coming along too, naturally," she said. "Let's make the best of the situation and come up with a better plan to save Mercury's prisoners while we are there!"

Ami had claimed part of the library as her workroom and sat behind a table, a pile of books towering to her right and a stack of sandwiches to her left. More comfortable among bookshelves and wall-covering diagrams than in a formal conference hall, she explained the newest twist to the attack plan that she had come up with.

"Have you lost your mind?" Snyder exclaimed, staring at Ami as if she had grown a second head.

"Not yet," Cathy said as she made a grab for the crystal ball that had started wobbling when the acolyte had jumped to his feet. She just caught it before it could fall off its pedestal. "But that idea sounds like the fastest way to do so. Seriously, it's terrible. Better discard it."

"I... respectfully second the reservations of my colleagues," Torian spoke up and avoided meeting Ami's eyes. "I would, of course, be the last person to accuse you of not having thought things through completely, your Imperial Majesty, but... I mean, yes, those dungeon hearts are undead, but I certainly don't need to remind *you* that the dungeon heart's mind and that of the Keeper are one and the same?"

"Yes, I am aware that I would effectively be targeting Crowned Death himself," the teenager said in a carefully-controlled tone of voice. With her hands under the table, nobody could see her knuckles whiten whenever she allowed herself to really think about that. While Torian's jaw would drop if he learned just how much gold she could use to boost the strength of the spell, she didn't expect the attempt to be pleasant.

"Then," the warlock looked up suddenly, his voice suddenly breathless, "you have come up with a way to succeed in spite of that?" If his eyes had gone any wider, they would have popped out of his head.

Ami shook her head. "It doesn't matter if I succeed or fail. While success would open up some interesting options, the only thing that's really important is keeping Crowned Death busy. I fear that the

assault will fail if he is not distracted. Remember our attack on Dreadfog Island? He was keeping his temple together and in working condition long after it should have crumbled into a pile of debris!"

"But can he do that while affected by a ward?" Cathy asked, her eyes drawn to the miniature replica of the swimming temple that hung off the ceiling.

"In the best case scenario, no," Ami said. "Worst case, the thing will self-repair like those Calarine staves."

"He couldn't do that with the Dreadfog temple," Snyder said.

"That one also wasn't externally powered at the time." Ami sighed and continued "However, what I actually expect to happen in this case is for the vessel to crash, go to pieces, and Crowned Death saving all but the piece that's in contact with the ward."

"That... would be unfortunate, my Empress," Torian agreed quickly. "Yes. Now I can see the wisdom in your proposition. Even a gnat- no offence intended, of course - can prove extremely distracting to something many times its size and power. Indeed-"

With a click, the electrical lights turned off all at the same time, concealing the secrets of the room and its occupants within deepest blackness. Only Ami's eyes still glowed red in the darkness, along with the warning bracelet around her wrist.

A spherical pendant around Snyder's neck lit up, briefly illuminating his face as he lifted it to eye height.

"You'd think people would have something better to do than spying on us all the time," Cathy grumbled. "Who is it now?"

The acolyte gazed into the miniature crystal ball as he tracked the scrying attempt back to its source. "An elderly elf with a beard, gazing into a forest pond," the acolyte replied. "I don't recognise him."

Space appeared to shift as Ami routinely transported all of them to a different room that resembled the one they had just been in, down to

the schematics covering the walls. Redundancy, she had learned, was the best way to keep getting things done despite prying eyes. "That does not sound like a Keeper's minion, at least," she pondered.

"Whoa, careful!" Cathy protested, waving her arms as the horde of imps tasked with keeping the contents of both rooms identical jostled her on the way out. She steadied herself against a bookshelf and looked at Ami. "To get back on topic, how long would you need to keep him distracted?"

"Until the ship has lost enough dungeon hearts and can no longer move under its own power," she replied, back on familiar ground. "Cathy, I need you to have the troops geared up and ready around the same time that the attack starts."

The swordswoman blinked, and Torian's pencil stopped scratching as he looked up from his work.

"If Keeper Clairmonte is still on the vessel, he's likely to die during the first stage of the attack, " Ami elaborated. "We have to be ready to seize and defend his territories the moment that happens. I will need the strategic mobility offered by the portals once the Dark Kingdom arrives."

The blonde whistled. "That's going to give a lot of people the wrong impression."

"Unfortunately, that can't be helped," Ami said. She'd try to explain things to the Avatar when she had the chance.

"At least your troops will be happy to see some action," Cathy continued. "Perhaps they'll even stop being bored and unruly and making trouble for me."

Ami nodded, feeling slightly guilty. She *had* been neglecting the denizens of her dungeon in favour of her prisoners and her research lately. It was just so much easier to let Tiger handle the routine details. "Good. You know where to find the maps, right? Please come up with some preliminary plans for the operation, I will go over them later. Ask Jadeite or Tiger to assist you."

"As you wish." Grinning, the swordswoman raised a hand in a mock salute before leaving.

Ami stepped in front of one of the large blueprints on the wall that depicted the fifty-three parts of the ward that to be used against the swimming temple. "Snyder, I need you to continue coordinating with the foreign wizards. All groups need to produce a second spare part."

The redhead raised one eyebrow. "Ah, I thought we would be handling that?"

Ami shook her head. "Originally, yes, but with my new idea, the warlocks will not be available to send the parts."

"Your Majesty?" Torian had stopped writing and watched her.

"I'll get to that soon," she told him. "Snyder, make sure that every group of external wizards has three different parts ready, just in case some have trouble meeting the quality requirements."

"Understood. What about the parts we have already forged locally?"

Ami hesitated for an instant. "Keep them and finish the whole set. Perhaps we can find a use for it later."

"All right." Snyder approached the pedestal with the crystal ball and pulled out his list of contacts and locations. "Now where has night not fallen yet?" he murmured as he consulted a map.

"Torian, please come along, I want to discuss this with all of the warlocks. You will be supporting me directly when I confront Crowned Death."

The purple-robed warlock winced as he followed a few steps behind her and grimaced as if he had just bitten into a lemon. "I was afraid you would say something along those lines, my Empress."

Last edited: Jul 12, 2016

Catastrophic Failure, Part 1

Originally on 2012-02-12T22:54:00

Electricity crackled in the air, and the ice floe Ami was standing on shuddered from a thudding impact. Wincing, she whirled to the source of the noise and found a network of cracks spreading outward from a large metal sphere resting on the ground. "Careful with that!" she said, worried about how far the noise would travel underwater.

"S-sorry, your Majesty," the bald youma trying her best to hide - unsuccessfully - behind the medicine ball-sized container replied, flattening her fin-like ears against her head. Her eyes darted left and right. "I'll just-"

"At ease, Lishika, nothing bad happened," Ami said quickly. "Don't move! Just return to the dungeon at once!"

"Yes Empress! Of course, Empress!" Lishika bowed in a manner reminiscent of Jadeite, with one arm across her chest, and dissolved into a cloud of crackling sparks in that position.

The young Keeper let out a relieved breath when the short youma disappeared without causing more trouble while frantically trying to make up for her mistake. Lishika was terrified of her for reasons she assumed to be related to the youma's long imprisonment in Eternal Sleep, but her teleportation ability was very useful right now.

The fog darkened for a heartbeat, and Ami heard the sound of scattering pebbles. Umbra and Tiger had arrived, carrying more of the metal containers.

"Whew, finally the last one," Tiger said as she put her burden down on the pile held together by a net. She glanced at the sphere partially embedded in the gently rocking ice. "I see scaredy cat was at it again. Are the fishes all right?"

Ami inspected the interior of the metal aquarium with her Keeper

sight. "They appear unharmed." She lifted the sphere with her Keeper powers and hovered it over to the others.

"Right. We are really going to do this, then?" the tiger-striped youma said, looking through the fog.

"Yes. Crowned Death's temple is moving through a trench below, so its course will be predictable for the next hour or so - if we aren't noticed." Ami took a more broad-legged stance as the ice floe shifted underneath her, rocked by a larger wave. "It's an almost perfect opportunity." Her armoured fingers nervously played with the tiny crystal ball hanging from her necklace as she calmed her nerves. She was about to launch a multi-national operation whose success or failure would rest almost entirely on her shoulders. In addition, she would be measuring her strength against an evil god. No pressure.

"You all right?" Tiger asked, peering down at Ami. "You spaced out for a moment."

"Yes, I was just thinking," Ami said. This wasn't the time to be hesitating, but the time to make Crowned Death pay for the evil he had instigated. Her voice steadier, she lifted the crystal ball in front of her eyes. She concentrated, and the scrying device started glowing. As she collected her thoughts, her black-armoured form stood completely still before the swirling backdrop of the fog. Some foam from the waves splattered over her, and she opened her crimson-glowing eyes. "Everyone, this is Empress Mercury," she stated clearly. "Begin the operation," she brought down her right arm in one swift gesture, "now!"

To her side, the metal spheres shifted as if struck by an invisible hammer, and rolled into the sea.

Dumat stifled a yawn as a procession of robed and hooded figures emerged from the main gate and marched down the hill in an orderly double row. He briefly tried to recognise familiar faces in the group, but quickly gave up. Despite the rainbow-coloured orb of light orbiting each apprentice, he could barely make out the jutting towers

of Praiselight Academy in the rain and darkness, much less facial features. Not that he needed to see the students' expressions to know that they were grumbling about being roused from their beds for reasons that hadn't been explained to them.

Being the court wizard, Dumat knew how to protect himself from inclement weather, of course. The umbrella hovering above his tall and pointy hat took care of the torrential downpour as he waited on the elevated wooden tribune. Nevertheless, he was mildly displeased by the dark empress' timing. Couldn't she have waited for a more pleasant night? He shook his head, casting the thought aside as unworthy of the gravity of the situation.

In the courtyard below, faculty members clad in various shades of blue directed the apprentices towards positions on an elevated wooden platform. Since it was roofed, there were no objections from the crowd.

Dumat heard the wooden stairs behind him creak and turned around.

A tall hat rose from below, preceding its wearer by almost half a meter. The man climbing the staircase looked as if he was around fifty years old, but his impressive beard and mane had not lost any of their vivid red colour yet.

"Greetings, Archmage," Dumat said with a smile.

The man grinned back. "Hah, I'll never get used to you calling me by your old title, Dumat. I still feel like an eager young student whenever I see you."

"Eager? For some ale, perhaps," the older wizard quipped. "Come on, I stepped down over twelve years ago. Do you want to make me feel old?" He stroked his long, grey beard demonstratively.

"Certainly not. You don't look one day over a hundred," Dumat's former apprentice teased, prompting him to shake his staff in mock outrage.

"Youth these days..." he commented and looked back at the

preparations below. "However, I can't find fault with the discipline you have instilled in your students, Gulver."

"High praise indeed, coming from you," the archmage replied.

Falling silent, the two men watched the student wizards move toward their positions with a minimum amount of wasted motion. Arranged in a semi-circle around a raised dais, they resembled an orchestra waiting for its conductor.

"Now, could you find it in your certainly-not-old heart to tell me what this is all about? What's so important that the Light saw it fit to even call wizards back from the front? I'm dying of curiosity here!"

"Sorry, that's classified by royal decree," Dumat answered, sighing. "We are making a delivery as part of a special anti-Keeper operation. I'm not at liberty to tell you more until it has been completed successfully," he added, and leaned in closer. "Among us, I almost wish I didn't know what this was all about. I'd sleep better at night."

"That bad, eh?" Gulver said in a deadpan tone of voice. He glanced down at the square section of interwoven metal bars that covered most of the courtyard. "That weird thing was a pain to shape, you know, especially given the specified tolerances. It's clearly a piece of a greater ward, but figuring out what you'd use one that big for defeats me. The lines are thicker than my arm, for crying out loud! Can't you give me a hint?"

"Sorry."

"What about confirming or denying a guess? I've got a bet going with the Dean that it's going to be used against the dark empress. He insists that the target is Mukrezar."

Dumat just shook is head slowly. "Shouldn't we be getting started? It looks as if the apprentices have sufficiently harmonised their energies to provide power for the spell."

"All right, all right," Gulver said. He muttered a short incantation, and a tremor went through his clothes. Starting at the collar of his robe, it

travelled downwards, wringing the rainwater from the sky-coloured cloth. "That's better. Now let's get started! The sooner we are done here, the sooner you will be answering all of my questions over a beer!"

A green filigree pattern, flat and almost the size of a small ship, announced the imminent arrival of yet another piece of the great ward.

Ami already evaluated where it would go before it could switch position with the water filling the curving green volume. Not having to rely on cameras was quite a boon when she had to work with haste and accuracy. Up in the clouds, a smile flitted over her face as her Keeper sight briefly centred on one of the repulsive deep sea fishes that allowed her to see what she was doing, serving a similar role as her tame rats on land.

The particular spiny creature she caught a glimpse of was still underneath one half of the metal sphere that had served as its pressurised aquarium in her dungeon. The slight vibrations and the fountaining black sludge whenever a ward piece landed on the ocean floor weren't making the animal any more inclined to leave its hiding place.

Ami returned her attention to the giant puzzle she had to assemble. She had, of course, memorised the number and position of each piece and knew exactly where it had to go. The slightly brighter paint on each part's backside reduced the complexity of the problem again. Nevertheless, the huge pieces were individually close to the weight limit on what her Keeper powers could move, and she sweated from the effort. The effort of precisely aligning each part of the arcane symbol was as critical to the success of this operation as it was time consuming. Ami resisted the urge to check up on Crowned Death's temple, which was getting closer with each passing second. Her welding work needed her full concentration. As a stream of steamy bubbles rose from the red-glowing ends of the bars she was fitting together, she was glad that she had practised this beforehand.

Golden chimes rang softly in the darkened room, as if a gentle wind was stirring them. The noise was faint enough to not disturb the conversation of the two figures watching a silver fire burn within a waist-high marble tub.

The taller of the two pointed at the flickering landscape formed by the flames, where objects moved seemingly on their own. "There. Another part attached. My evil counterpart seems competent, at least."

"Many people wish she wasn't, Sire. May her competence actually be to our benefit this time," Hieron of the Plains stated solemnly. The transparent shape of the oracle was as colourless as the images over the basin, which he was touching with both hands.

"Can you bring us closer?" the Emperor asked. Atypical for a fairy, he stood a bit taller than the average human. A vast laurel, its leaves carved from emerald, rested around his neck and shoulders as symbol of his office.

"I shall, my Liege, as soon as the whales have recovered their breath."

"Very well. Do you think she will be done before the abominable craft reaches her?" His wings twitched, betraying his nervousness and disturbing the streamers of semi-transparent silk that hung down from his laurel like banners. Even more unusual than his coal-coloured hair were the pearly-white feathers that partially sheathed his dragonfly wings.

"I believe she will, your Majesty. Most pieces arrived exactly where they were supposed to." He shifted his grip on the basin, and the flames briefly flared unconstrained before knotting into the octagonal, tentacle-trailing shape of Crowned Death's vessel.

"Impressive. Directional beacons can be a bit imprecise at the best of times. The enemy is staying well outside of their emission cones?"

"Yes, Sire. The undead would have to be specifically looking for

them to detect them. Oh, and Kanif of the Southern Seas has just combined his perceptions with mine."

The shaped flames above the basin became much crisper as the oracle spoke, and the emperor peered closer. "What are those little balls approaching the temple?" he asked, pointing at several spheres that seemed like specks of dust when compared to the floating structure.

Hieron slowly raised his nose, and the object in question grew in size. So did the enormous sucker-covered tentacle it was drifting past. "They look like some of Empress Mercury's aquariums," he said. "It appears as if she wants to keep a closer eye on things."

"That does not look like a fish to me," the emperor said when the container split in half and revealed something that looked like a slender harpoon.

An unseen force placed attached the spear to another strange device with a propeller at the end, aimed it, and then sent it in the direction of the vessel passing overhead.

"A new weapon?" the oracle asked as he watched the projectile disappear within one of the structure's openings. "It seems too small to inflict significant damage."

"Your guess is as good as mine," the emperor said. "How is the ward coming along?"

The fire changed its shape into a flat disc consisting of intertwining lines and empty space. Only its bottom edge still rested on the ocean floor, because chains attached to the upper edge were pulling it upright.

"The dark empress seems to be lifting it into position as we speak. Well on schedule, if she can get the altitude right."

The emperor tilted his head backwards and looked up at the other end of the chains, where rock-like objects slowly moved upwards. "I hope she knows precisely how much ice to use," he said. "It would be a shame if she failed at this point. Show me the temple again."

The oracle complied, producing a silvery model of the tentacled construct slowly drifting through an underwater valley.

"I am still vexed that we managed to miss something that huge for so long." The monarch glared at the tiny model of the floating temple and crossed his arms, making his bracelets jingle.

"The abomination has stayed outside of our detection range so far, your Majesty," the ghostly oracle replied.

"Yes, and I am displeased that a dark god knows enough about it to avoid it, " the Emperor replied.

Hieron stopped watching the unchanging scene of the unholy structure moving and looked at his ruler directly. "It is a problem we could remedy once empress Mercury completes our embassy," he suggested.

"If one of you Oracles is actually willing to go there." A puzzled expression flitted briefly over the emperor's aristocratic features. "I am still surprised about how easily she acquiesced to my demands. It implies worrisome things about the depths of her coffers."

"How is that girl we sent there as ambassador doing so far?" the oracle asked, sounding honestly concerned.

"About as well as one could expect from someone not trained for the job. Her grasp on the correct flowery official and time-wasting jargon remains atrocious," the emperor commented. "She has not complained about being mistreated or threatened, in case your conscience is giving you trouble."

The shaped flames briefly lost definition, informing the emperor that his speculation had been right on target.

"I'm happy to hear that, your Majesty," the oracle said after a moment.

"I am rather glad I didn't send her to a needless death too." His gaze focused on an object that appeared in the distance. "The ward! Maintain your concentration, I do not want to miss a single instant of this!"

Ami's heart beat rapidly as the temple approached the trap. Would it remain at the right altitude? For the sixth time, she checked the taut chains that kept the huge ward in position for the sixth time. The one anchoring the intricate metal pattern to the ground looked as pristine as it had five seconds ago. She would have to put some effort into cutting it if she needed the trap to float up at the last moment. Neither had anything gone wrong with the ice blocks lifting the construct, and which she could cut to make it sink. Ami felt a bit like a spider trying to catch a very large fly with a very small net.

"No change in the target's course or speed," Jered's voice came from a ring of blue fire rotating in the air above, calming her nerves somewhat.

"Mareki, Umbra, Tiger, Lishika," she said, addressing the four youma floating around her in a square formation. "I may be too distracted during the attack to react to events up here. Make sure to move Snyder and me to a new location if it looks as if the enemy has spotted us!"

"Yes, your Majesty!" the four youma replied in unison.

Only Mareki abstained from bowing, since she was carrying Snyder in her arms. Neither the acolyte nor the monstrous creature looked very happy about the arrangement.

"Please attempt to not channel physically damaging amounts of magic if you can avoid it, even if you have a healer on stand-by," the redhead said. His eyes never strayed toward the ocean far, far below.

"I'm not making any promises," Ami said, staring worriedly at the spot on the waves underneath which she knew the death god's temple to be moving. Some elements of the plan were not in position yet.

Above, a spray of bubbles shot out of the burning magical circle, bursting and filling the air with fog. However, the mist didn't impair the vision of anyone present.

"Cloud was thinning out a bit," Cathy's distant voice came from the circle.

Ami nodded. She was waiting for a signal from the spears she had propelled into the temple's openings earlier. Still nothing. Had she misjudged the dosage? It had worked in the tests, but perhaps real-life conditions were different. Could water pressure and salinity have an effect on duration? She should have run more experiments! The temple would be slamming into the ward soon!

Finally, she perceived what she had been waiting for, and sighed in relief. One of the spears had reverted back into a fish. The tiny animal was alive, and most importantly, had passed unharmed through the field of killing magic covering the entrance while transformed into a lifeless object. Quickly, she instructed the fish to hide in the shadows of the catacomb-like tunnels while it hurried ahead. Her Keeper sight, centred on the little creature, could detect enemies further out than it could see. It didn't take long at all for her to spot a skeletal worker. Perfect. She remotely cast Torian's undead-dominating spell on the animated construct of metal-sheathed bones. To her pleasant surprise, it offered much less resistance than the ghosts she had practised on; it was as if it had no will of its own.

Ami hid her scaled minion within the skull of the skeleton and sent the creature onwards, only occasionally having to check her palmtop computer for the right route. She had committed as much of the unholy structure's layout to memory as she knew about it, which was limited to what she had been able to deduce from her probe's expedition. That knowledge was allowing her skeletal thrall to save time now as it navigated through the maze.

Since the undead creature did not have a solid body, it dealt with the resistance of the surrounding water quite well and moved faster than Ami had expected. Unfortunately, the need to protect the fish by circumventing other death fields within the vessel meant that it could not take the most direct route. When it finally arrived in the central hollow, Ami was sweating despite the cold air surrounding her.

She sent the unresisting minion toward the unfinished cylinder looming like a black tower in the distance. Its builders had made

progress, but its roof still wasn't done. She assumed that Crowned Death found it more economical to use his undead forces for construction than to make the dungeon heart spend gold. In particular if the latter could be used to fuel his arrival in this world instead.

The skeleton she controlled moved into a corner underneath a bridge and hid. Meanwhile, she concentrated on a spell that her warlocks had developed in parallel with the undead-controlling one, with some input from Jadeite. As she ran the complex pattern through the dungeon heart and empowered it with some of Metallia's energy, an object formed in front of the hiding skeleton.

The undead creature leaned down and picked up the device that resembled a stone manhole cover and resumed its jog toward the construction site.

Ami hoped that the item would perform as intended, since she hadn't had the possibility to test all of its functions. The conjured crystal ball set into its centre would work fine and serve as a camera, bypassing the temple's scrying protections. She was also certain that the device's explosive self-destruct would work as advertised if it failed in its true mission, taking at least one dungeon heart with it. The untested part was derived from the circlet Jadeite had used to control Baron Leopold as well as from Torian's spell. Without an undead dungeon heart to try it out on, she simply had to hope that it would let her bypass the artefact's innate resistance against direct magic as planned.

She quickly checked the distance between ward and swimming temple again and started at how close they were to each other already. Impact was barely a dozen seconds away.

Since none of the skeletons swarming over the scaffolding and moving huge stone blocks paid any attention to Ami's thrall, she had it sprint ahead and dash in through the open door. As it ran toward the swirling column of green motes rising from the dungeon heart, several eyeless skulls slowly turned to track its weird behaviour. Before their owners could react, the skeleton threw its burden over the wall surrounding the round pit.

As the magical receiver sank toward the grey, stitched-together membrane pulsating below, Ami held out the Mercury computer to her right. "Lishika! Bring this to the warlocks right now!"

The device had barely left her hand when she grabbed one of the crystal balls attached to her necklace. "Torian, begin at them moment of impact!"

Sparing no more words, the young Keeper switched her view underwater, where the temple was barrelling down upon the much smaller ward. The collision would happen slightly off-centre, but it *would* happen. Pressing her lips together in determination, Ami gathered her magic to strip away the temple's last and most simplistic defence.

Seconds before impact, the building's non-magical outer shell jerked and trembled, sprouting deep cracks from the barrage of tremor spells ripping it to pieces. Black stone plates the size of a street crumbled and flaked off, brushed away by the water streaming past. Nothing remained to isolate the magical vessel from the power-draining ward mere metres away and approaching rapidly. Then, several things happened at once.

"Torian, begin at the moment of impact!"

The warlock's gaze jumped to the huge crystal ball hanging from the ceiling. It showed a view from the bottom of a circular hole that was framed by decaying arches. Above it, a column of swirling green motes partially obscured the air bubble even further above. Within the sphere, the warlock discerned a bloody figure curled up in foetal position. That had to be Clairmonte paying the usual price of failure. Torian's resolve to not fail redoubled.

Briefly, his eyes flitted down to the Mercury computer that rested on top of a chest-high pillar in front of him. The device was supposed to guide him through the ritual, telling him when and where to make adjustments. Oh, what he would give to know how the Empress had acquired such a wonder!

The grip of his hand on his staff tightened, pressing his rings hard into his flesh. This was it. This was the moment of truth, in which he would have to prove his skills to the empress. "Link up!" he barked, his voice echoing through the hall. He reached out with his left hand, putting it on the shoulder of the warlock to his side. At the same time, he felt a corresponding touch on his right shoulder as his neighbour in the circle did the same. Soon, the air crackled and smelled of iron as the gathered magic users prepared to unleash their power.

Torian glanced at the six chanting warlocks in the centre of the circle. Despite their location, they were not directly part of the ritual, and the jagged red diagram he had meticulously painted onto the floor did not allocate positions to them. With a critical eye, he inspected the counter-rotating flaming circles in their midst. They had better not mess up the transmission ring if they knew what was good for them! Finding no flaw with the modified summoning spell, he promptly ignored the figures in their flapping robes to observe the crystal ball.

Skulls had appeared above the hole, staring down with empty eye sockets lit from within. Despite the skeletons' expressionless faces, he could tell from their jerking and undecided movements that they were unhappy about the situation.

Torian suppressed a whimper of fear when a shadow fell over the pit and the huge, dead face of the Incarnation of Extinction suddenly stared straight at him. *"Can't kill me through the crystal ball. Can't kill me through the crystal ball,"* he repeated in his mind when the apparition's transparent hand seemed to reach for him.

The limb froze when a sudden cacophony of distant breaking noises joined the deep beat of the dungeon heart. A split-second later, a metallic sound like the stroke of a gong drowned out all other noise. The Incarnation and its companions disappeared from view, flung aside as the vessel lurched violently.

Torian raised his flaring staff with a brisk motion. "Now!"

Last edited: Jul 1, 2016

Catastrophic Failure, Part 2

Originally on 2012-02-12T23:33:00

Ami felt her ward vibrate from the impact and saw the temple jerk. She had to strike now! Wasting no time, she brought the undead-dominating spell to her mind and lashed out with her will, ramming it into the rotten dungeon heart like a pickaxe. It felt like running head-first into a wall.

"FOOL."

With spots dancing before her vision, she blinked, dazed by the unyielding resistance she had encountered. *At least I got his attention,* she thought, shuddering at the memory of the dark god's cold, emotionless voice. Belatedly, she noticed that Tiger had grabbed her around the shoulders and was holding her aloft. She quickly renewed her failing flight spell and returned her attention to the temple. Her eyes widened in horror when she saw it floating undisturbed, the ward ripped from its moorings still stuck to prow. What had gone wrong? She had *seen* it tumble upon impact!

It lurched from shedding weight! she realised when she saw undead sea creatures swarming out in every direction, leaving the temple bereft of its tentacles. *But how can it still be swimming? The ward is-* Then she saw what the intricate metal structure was actually touching. "Ice!" she gasped in dismay.

No reason to panic yet. She could still fix this! Drawing power from her treasury, she focused several tremor spells into the contact points, rattling the ice. Sharp-edged splinters came loose and lodged within the undead latching onto the ward.

One of the fishes Ami used to observe the temple and aim her spells died, ripped apart by frenzied zombies, and so did a second.

Re-centring her Keeper sight, she saw that the ice was growing faster than she was destroying it. Water flooding into the cracks froze instantly, preventing the ward from getting any closer. She

changed her approach. A curtain of steam-filled bubbles exploded outwards, intermingled with boiled pieces of grasping tentacles. Yet, the ward did not move. Given its nature, she cold not target it directly with spells, otherwise she would have tried rendering it white-hot. By now, the ice carapace encasing the entire temple was thick enough that parts of the ward were trapped within it, making it impossible to budge.

"Death priests! Empress, there are death priests teleporting around the area, searching for us!" Umbra interrupted her. The cloaked youma's arm pointed toward the west, where a shadowy figure swung its staff at a cloud, producing a shockwave that blasted it apart.

"Avoid them!" the blue-haired girl ordered, refusing to give in to despair or to be distracted. Her mind raced as she tried to decide just how to salvage the situation. If she tried to force the ward into contact with the vessel any more violently, it would simply become collateral damage. Should she focus on distracting Crowned Death from what her warlocks were doing instead?

The last of her many terrified fishes observing the temple died, squished by an octopus that missed half of its tentacles. The loss of her ability to accurately aim her spells at the outside of the vessel made the choice for her.

Snyder sucked in a startled breath as the teenage freely drew upon the power of Metallia, surrounding herself with a nimbus of dark energy to make a serious attempt at wresting control from Crowned Death. She unleashed the spell, letting out a short cry. Will clashed against will, and Ami almost blacked out as she was swept aside like a mote of dust.

"JUST KEEP HURTING YOURSELF."

Ami held her head with both hands, grimacing. The vicious satisfaction the entity radiated had almost been more painful than the attempt. Apparently, it didn't take much to amuse that particular dark god. She gritted her teeth as her own dungeon heart started to vacuum up gold from the treasury, providing her with an ever-increasing stream of magic.

"Mercury! That's dangerous!" Snyder warned.

Ami ignored him. If she didn't make her attempts convincing, then Crowned Death would clue in to what was really happening. She attacked again, focusing more magic into a single spell than she had ever before. When she pitted her will against that of the dark god this time, she felt him recoil like a man whose pet kitten had just unexpectedly swatted him on the noise. He did not taunt her this time as he kicked her out.

"...do something! She's bleeding from her ears!" Ami heard as she was jolted awake by the horrid sensation of holy magic being used on her.

"I'm awake, I'm awake!" she protested as she struggled to get away from the healing spell, upright, and out of Tiger's arms all at the same time. Her head felt as if it had been used as a football for an hour.

"Crap! The ward is all bent out of shape now!" Jered's voice came from the fiery ring above. "Also, that wavy line on the screen over here is getting all spiky and orange!"

"That's good, it means the plan is working!" Ami caught her breath, fighting through her headache on pure determination. Streamers of dark energy collected in her hands as she prepared a repeat performance.

"Again? Are you crazy or just a masochist? " her adopted sister screamed into her ear and grabbed her by her shoulders. "That last attempt almost killed you!"

"Which is why I'm not going to add much more power," Ami said, already focusing. Knowing what to expect, she forged her will into a spear point, ready to pierce through the dark god's defences. Knowing that she was doing this to protect the world only boosted her determination.

And encountered no resistance.

For one baffled instant, she perceived the entirety of the floating

vessel. She caught a glimpse of thirteen ruby Calarine staves submerged within liquefied mana in a central chamber. Intricate magical constructs defied her comprehension, and the riches stashed away in the cargo holds dwarfed her own. Before she could react, the clarity was gone. Utter darkness descended upon her as Crowned Death's will hit her like an avalanche, crushing her into the ground of the unreal chamber and preventing her from doing as much as blink.

"SURPRISE! KEEPER, DID YOU PLAN FOR SUCCESS?"

Ami shivered and fought to get free. She might as well have tried to move a mountain by breathing on it. Had the death god let her take over the dungeon heart just so he could get a stronger connection to her mind? "W-what happened?" she asked meekly, trying to get him to talk. This wasn't how she had planned to distract him, but if her theory was right, then she would be freed the moment the dominated dungeon heart was destroyed.

A vast crown of dark fire descended from above, bringing with it a chorus of tormented screams that trailed off into crackling gurgles. As the grotesque apparition got closer, the appalled girl could see that it was made of people burning alive, melting away and reforming in an unending loop of agony.

"YOU WANTED THE HEART. NOW YOU HAVE IT. AND I HAVE YOU." For as long as the abomination spoke, the screams of its victims fell quiet.

The crown settled on the ground with a thunderous thud, surrounding the teenager like a flaming barrier. Wherever she looked, agonized faces and burning hands protruded pleadingly from the blaze, only to be slowly consumed.

"NOW TELL ME WHERE YOU GET SO MUCH GOLD FROM THAT YOU CAN WASTE IT FRIVOLOUSLY ON SPELLS."

Ami's fear redoubled, not just for herself, but for the world. If the death god learned how she produced her gems, he could enter the world within months! She'd have to hold out until her warlocks succeeded!

"STILL DEFIANT? DO YOU REALLY THINK YOU CAN OUTWIT DEATH?" Crowned Death waited for an answer while the victims writhing inside his chosen form filled the silence.

Ami remained quiet. She *really* didn't like where this was going.

"TRYING TO BEFUDDLE THE SENSES OF MY DUNGEON HEARTS WITH ILLUSIONS AND HAVING THEM UNWITTINGLY TEAM UP AGAINST EACH OTHER IS CLEVER. FOR MORTALS."

Paralysed as she was, Ami couldn't flinch in response. Mission completely and utterly failed. She was getting out of here right now! Concentration as hard as she could, she sent the self-destruct signal for the transmitter on the heart.

"OH, THAT." The smugness radiating off the burning crown was almost unbearable as it let her catch a glimpse of the outside. The Incarnation of Extinction, crouching above the dungeon heart and pressing its hand onto Ami's device.

"That can't be good," Mareki said as she stared at the unconscious girl draped over Tiger's arm. Or more precisely, at her head.

"You think so? Gee, we have a certified genius here!" the striped youma shouted, her voice shrill. "Now get the healer over here so he can do something about this!" She didn't have a hand free to gesture at the source of her panic, but everyone else would have to be blind to not notice the crown of black fire that was floating above Mercury's blue hair. *Oh Metallia! I hope she doesn't move her head and makes that thing touch me!* "Snyder! HURRY!"

"They never taught us at the abbey how to handle something like that!" The acolyte complained as he dutifully reached for the teenage girl, gathering white light in his palms. "An exorcism would perhaps be appropriate?"

As soon as his fingertips touched Ami's forehead, the previously limp girl went rigid and snarled. Not opening her eyes, she lashed out at the young man with an open-handed slap, her fingers covered

in crackling, necrotic energy.

The redhead yelped in terror and dropped downwards, saved by Mareki's quick reaction. Above their heads, the swipe cut a gash into the mist for several metres.

Mercury snarled again when Tiger jumped on her back and pinned her arms to her sides. Even with the youma's greater size and more muscular build, she struggled to maintain a solid grip on the younger girl."Someone, do something, quickly! I don't know how long I can hold her! Don't just stand there making stupid faces!" One of her hands found Ami's crystal ball necklace. "Torian! What do your books say about getting a dark god out of a Keeper?"

"Say what?"

Torian wasn't the only one who had overheard the Dark Princess. Shocked by her words, he stood frozen as other warlocks lost their concentration and the ritual disintegrated, random discharges of magic filling the air with colourful fireworks. "Stop! Concentrate!" he shouted, but quickly gave up as it was obviously too late to salvage the situation. The Empress would have his head for this, if Crowned Death didn't get it first!

He chewed on his overly-long nails as he watched his colleagues rush towards the crystal balls to see what was going on. He was so screwed. Wait, he was a brilliant warlock! With his surpassing intellect, he should be able to come up with a way to save himself. To summarise the situation, the ritual he was responsible for had failed, and the Empress was currently in great danger and possibly possessed by a dark god, which didn't make much of a difference since either would kill him. Maybe he should just end it all now and spare himself the suffering?

No, wait, if he saved the Empress, he would not only be pardoned for his failure, he might even grow in favour! It was dangerous, certainly, but in the current situation, everyone here was living on borrowed time anyway. Now, how would he go about it? Of course! Torian turned on his heel and pushed his way past the other

warlocks as he walked toward a pillar.

"Lishika!" he called.

The youma's face peeked out from behind her hiding spot. "Y-yes, Sir?"

"Take me to the Empress right now."

"But-"

"Now!"

"Yes Sir. Um, can I climb on your back?"

Torian obligingly turned around. "Just hurry and don't drop me! Go!"

"O-okay!" With a crackle, both disappeared, leaving nothing but the smell of ozone behind.

"Yaarg!" Torian shouted as he reappeared, his entire body tingling from the small electrical discharge that had passed through it. His hair stood on end, and he was glad that he kept his oiled beard short.

"I tried to warn you, Sir!" Lishika said meekly.

"Whatever." Torian scanned his surroundings, and then the horizon.

"Are you here to help?" Mareki asked, but he ignored her. He also did his best to ignore the hissing, snarling noises of the Empress as she tried to get loose and eviscerate her sister. No human throat should have been able to produce such noises, he thought, shuddering. Finally, he spotted his quarry near a rapidly disintegrating cloud.

"Lishika, that death priest over there. Bring me right behind him! Touch range!"

"Are you sure? You'll be jolt-"

"Stop questioning my orders!"

"Yes Sir!"

In a shower of sparks, both disappeared from sight. This time, Torian was better prepared for the experience, and managed to suppress his yelp. The gem set into the top of his staff shone red as he rammed it into the back of the undead wizard's skull. Barking out the words for Torians Amazing Undead Dominator while suffering from muscle spasms was hard, but he somehow managed.

The black-robed death priest did not submit to the warlock's control and struggled mightily, bringing up his battle staff of Calarine. Torian put an end to that nonsense by whacking him with his own staff again, shattering both animal skulls adorning the creature's shoulders. As it went motionless, he let out a relieved sigh. "Right. Hard part done."

"Can we go home now? You are heavy!"

"Soon. Very soon," Torian said, his pearly-white teeth bared in a nasty grin. He was riding in the back of the death priest's mind, seeing through its eyes and whispering suggestions. Following his instructions, the skeleton wizard disappeared and reappeared within Clairmonte's air bubble.

Torian carefully lined up his thrall's weapon, pointing it downward in a line that went through the catatonic Keeper. Useful collateral damage, really. His real target was further down. Not the receiver device, since it was too close to the dungeon heart to be affected anyway. Besides, he didn't want to accidentally hit the Empress too. No, his prey was the Incarnation of Extinction still crouched over the pit. It was a part of Crowned Death, and, well, getting trapped in a spell for subjective aeons had to be disruptive to his efforts to control her Majesty, right?

Torian was laughing maniacally at the point where the Calarine staff discharged its black beam, reducing Clairmonte to a mummified husk that crumbled into dust. The sinister ray moved onward, striking the demonic spirit in the back.

He choked on his laugh when the Incarnation slowly turned its head *while the ray was still active and washing over it*.

"It almost looked at me!" Torian whined, his voice hysterical. "The death priest's mind was already crumbling away around me when I got out! I almost died!"

"Yeah, yeah, but it didn't help!" Tiger said, all of her limbs wrapped around Ami. "Ow, she just kicked me! Do you have any other plan?"

The warlock hung his head. "Sadly, no. I am all out of suggestions."

"At least you got Clairmonte," Lishika comforted the man she was holding up by his shoulders. "Also, you are still heavy!"

"Crap. Anyone else? Snyder? Jered?"

"I do not know what to do."

"Nope, nothing."

The striped youma shrugged. "Well, I guess only one option left." She deftly shifted her grip, putting her hand around Ami's throat.

"Wait, what are you-"

"Don't!"

"You can't mean to-"

A rune appeared on the back of Tiger's hand, flaring white and sucking in the light at the same time. For an instant, black and white flashes obscured both her and her captive. When the miniature thunderstorm ended, only a single figure remained. Taller than either Ami or Tiger, it bore a much stronger resemblance to the youma, sporting both deep black stripes and curved horns. However, Ami's armour seemed to have fused with the curvy body.

The figure laughed at the dumbfounded expression of the humans present. "What? I'm a youma! Sometimes, we possess people!" She

put her arms akimbo when the silence continued. "Come on now. Is it really that surprising?"

"Err, well, that-" Torian gulped and pointed with his index finger at a spot above Tiger's head.

She rolled up her eyes and caught a glimpse of a black flame. "Crown's still there? Well, it doesn't seem to affect me. I guess it's only for Mercury. She didn't try to keep me out, by the way. Now-ohhh, what do we have here?"

Tiger turned her attention inward. A brief inventory of her host body showed her that she had access to all of Ami's senses, including the Keeper ones - but not the powers, curses! It did make it easier to find her sister's missing mind, though. Oh. Oh dear. She could see poor Ami corralled by a horrid burning crown. However, she could also see that it was only a minuscule extrusion of an unbelievably greater mass somewhere outside the confines of her mind. She didn't look too closely, since she valued her sanity, but it seemed to her as if Crowned Death and some rigid, angular entity of similar dimensions were exchanging unenthusiastic blows. She wanted no part of this. Nope.

Staying as far away from the crown as she could and moving on metaphorical tiptoes, she experimented with the Keeper senses some more and found to her surprise that they covered the - sadly unharmed - temple below. Could it be that Ami had somehow succeeded in taking over a heart? Remembering the unfathomably powerful entities fighting in the background, she adjusted her estimation of the teenager's abilities upwards a whole lot. Anyway, a dominated heart would - yes! Yes! The domination magic didn't care one bit that she wasn't actually her sister! She had her Keeper powers back!

Gleefully, the youma rubbed her hands. She'd probably end up like Ami the moment she executed a command and Crowned Death noticed her, so she'd better go for maximum carnage and mayhem. Fortunately, both mana pool and treasuries seemed to be filled to the brim. What should she do? Blow up that Calarine pool-thingy in the vessel's centre? Sell off the temple's hull? Fill all available space with a hugely expensive room to empty the death god's coffers?

Nah, he could just sell it off again, and it wouldn't help with freeing Ami and potentially herself.

She thought she was onto something with the construction idea, though. This was an organic heart, which meant that it could build huge rooms in one go. She'd be able to cover much more area that way than with a spell. Now, she only needed to build something tremendously harmful. Hmm. What was that amazing molecule again that her sister was too much of a worrywart to risk proliferating? It was some ridiculously simple formula. One chlorine and three - right! Oh, yes, this would be perfect. Construction chosen, area: any available free space. Go!

If there was any delay between completing her instruction and suffering - briefly - from the excruciating pain caused by a dungeon heart coming under attack, then Tiger was unable to measure it.

"Empress? Head warlock?" an excited voice came from the crystal ball that was currently part of Tiger's collarbone.

The youma frowned. That could get annoying really fast.

"What is it?" Torian replied, watching Tiger with a worried expression. Not too worried though, since her flaming crown had disappeared the moment she had doubled over in pain.

"The enemy temple! It's on fire!" the voice shouted.

"Huh?" He involuntarily looked down, and then kept looking, his eyes growing wider and wider. Something underneath the waves was burning bright enough to make them shine like the setting sun. "I- I can see that." He looked up at Tiger, his expression begging for an explanation. "What are they burning?"

"The temple."

"Yes, you already told me that!"

"You don't understand! The *stone* is on fire! *Underwater!*"

Torian blinked. So did most of the youma.

"By all the dark gods, it just crashed and now the sand is burning too! Look at it!" another warlock shouted in the background.

"I think even the water is on fire," the first one muttered in a voice that bordered on religious rapture.

"Don't be silly," Tiger interrupted. "The water is too busy exploding to be on fire!"

"I... I stand corrected."

Torian opened his mouth, then closed it again. Open. Close. And again. Finally, he managed to blurt out a single word. "How?"

"Do you really expect me to divulge my secrets? Let's just say that my sister can be a bit of a sissy at times. I'm not."

The skeleton that teleported onto the battlements had a gilded skull covered partly by a ruby mask. "Mukrezar!"

The pointy-eared Keeper didn't turn around. "I'm busy," he said, pointing across the tooth-shaped crenellations of his dungeon. "Those corpses won't poison themselves, High Priest."

"Mukrezar, you must-"

On the blood-soaked battlefield, a white cave crow keeled over, a half-devoured eye in its beak.

"This would be so much easier if those fools just caved in to my imminently reasonable demands, but no! They prefer me killing them and turning to cannibalism." He shook his head slowly, making disappointed noises.

"I have important instructions from-"

"Actually, since you are here, how about you zombify some of those corpses for me? The meal climbing out of the pot to wreak carnage

upon the starving defenders would be deliciously ironic, in my opinion."

"SHUT UP!"

Mukrezar finally turned around and looked his visitor up and down. Water dripped from the skeleton's richly-embroidered robes, creating a puddle around its feet. The elf looked pointedly at the garment's singed fringe, which was still steaming. "Bad day?"

"DO NOT STRAIN MY PATIENCE ANY FURTHER!" Crowned Death's voice blasted out of the priest's mouth, causing its jawbone to disintegrate.

"I'm listening," the pink-haired man said, his face wary.

"PLANS HAVE CHANGED." The skeleton's left arm fell off under the strain of directly channelling its master.

Mukrezar refrained from commenting.

"KEEPER MERCURY MUST BE DESTROYED."

The elven Keeper watched in fascination as the priest seemed to shrink while bone dust trickled out from underneath the hem of his robe. "Your priests have expressed that sentiment before," he said cautiously.

"DEAL WITH HER!"

As the other arm hit the ground, Mukrezar protested "Wait, what happened to me not being qualified for that job?"

"YOU HAVE YOUR ORDERS. DON'T DARE TO DEFY ME!"

With that, the rest of the skeleton withered away, leaving a wet and foul-smelling pile of rot on the floor. Mukrezar contemplated it in silence for a long time. "Huh. Butler! Go find out what Mercury did to piss him off this time!"

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Expansion

Originally on 2012-03-09T15:42:00

"What the- ?" Gulver shouted when the crystal ball he was stooped over erupted with light. He hopped backwards and squinted into the glare. "Dumat! Dumat, come over here and watch this, quickly!"

Hearing the urgency in the redhead's voice, the court wizard moved fast, careful not to step on the lines of the intricate diagrams covering the ground. As he headed over to the archmage, trailed by his floating umbrella, the younger students' made no attempt to hide their curiosity.

"I hope this is important," he said as he sidled up to the red-bearded wizard. "We have to be ready for the second phase, you know." Not that there would be a great need to hurry if everything went according to the plan, since the target would be immobile in that case.

"Just take a look. I hope a huge seething fireball fits into the plan," The blue-clad wizard said as he picked up the scrying device and thrust it at Dumat's face.

From the vantage point of the crystal ball, the sky was both falling and on fire.

Dumat's eyes opened wide as he saw the avalanche of black, flame-wreathed masonry drop toward him at alarming speeds, and he bit back a curse. "By all the fires of the Underworld, what was that thing carrying?" As he stared into the descending bonfire, the court wizard mentally went through a list of spells and substances that could cause accidents like that if magical containment failed.

The flaming wreckage tumbled through his position, but he only caught brief glimpses of disconnected floors and walls, explosions, and flames almost too bright to look at. Wait, were those stones *burning*? Now that he saw the temple from above, he became aware of the full extent of its damage. It's top parts no longer existed,

revealing a hollowed-out interior that looked like a brazier filled with white-hot coals. Awed, Dumat kept staring into the conflagration as the structure sank deeper and deeper and broke up into multiple parts.

Next to him, the archmage gulped as he watched the fireball descend. "Was that a giant octopus?" he asked as one of the shadows caught in the temple's wake drifted past nearby. "Light, all those little dots flitting about - th-those aren't just tiny fishes! How big is that fire?"

"Likely as big as the academy grounds," Dumat replied, not taking his eyes of the crystal ball."And I still have no idea what caused it." He shuddered. The idea of the death god - or possibly the dark empress - being able to cause such devastation was terrifying.

In silence, the two men watched the remains of the temple crash into the ocean floor and go to pieces. Sections that still remained more or less whole shattered into rubble, causing another flare-up of the flames.

"So, are you allowed to tell me what that thing is - or rather was - now?" Gulver asked.

Dumat straightened as the sludge fountaining up from the impact formed billowing clouds around the fires, hiding them from view. "Hight temple of Crowned Death," he said simply.

The archmage coughed and whirled to look at him, eyes wide. "Seriously?"

"That," Dumat pointed at the crystal ball, "wasn't really part of the plan, but on the positive side, we won't be needing the second phase of the operation. That thing is already well and truly destroyed."

"A bit of an understatement there." Gulver slapped Dumat on the shoulder and grinned. "I'm sure there will be a victory celebration of some kind tomorrow. Now come along."

The court wizard felt himself being yanked by the arm and almost

lost his balance as the other mage dragged him along. With hurried footsteps he followed Gulver toward the courtyard's gates "Slow down! Are you that eager to get to the tavern?"

"Forget the tavern!" Gulver said. "We are headed to the temple to set up some containment wards! We can't miss the opportunity to summon some of that burning stuff and study it!"

"Move it! We don't have much time, so get through those damn portals already!" Cathy's shout echoed within the reaperbot command centre. The blonde, wearing a full suit of armour, leaned on the railing of a raised balcony at one end of the cylindrical room.

A mosaic of viewscreens covered the remote wall, showing her the situation through the eyes of the reaperbots. In rapid succession, individual displays gained an orange tint as their automaton rushed into the glow of a portal. Once through, they changed again to display the dark caverns of the Underworld.

"Demon Group, ignore the locals," Cathy ordered as some trolls with torches gaped at the steel warriors pouring into their realm. "The same goes for Chaos Group."

From underneath the fog-covered ground came a few disappointed sighs. "Aw, want fight!" one of the green-skinned pilots in his capsule complained.

"Cut the chatter!" the swordswoman demanded.

"Anger group in position," an even female voice informed Cathy, drawing her eyes to the slender form of Eline pacing on the ground floor. On her pointy-eared head, the bald albino was wearing a cap with a large, stylised 'A' emblazoned on its front.

"Chaos Group in position," the second of the five dark elves observing separate sections of the wall screens said barely a heartbeat later. Her own cap was decorated with a 'C'.

"Demon Group in position."

"Evil Group in position, Commander."

The fifth figure didn't join in, since she was too busy darting about between different pilot sarcophagi, stomping on their lids, and hissing angry instructions at the goblins within.

Cathy frowned at Venna, whose green uniform shirt strained to contain her assets as she squatted down next to one of the pilot capsule hatches. "Bane Group, stop being slower than snails, or I'm going to put you through remedial training! The others, invade as soon as the portals are ready!"

"Yes, Commander!" an enthusiastic, if not particularly harmonic chorus of goblin voices confirmed.

In contrast to the green-skinned pilots in their underground capsules, the blonde was terribly worried. In addition to this being her first solo command, she also didn't know if going ahead with the invasion had been the right decision. *I hope Mercury can get Crowned Death out of her head, or we are all screwed.*

"Bane Group in position," Venna blurted out, having finally cajoled her goblins into some semblance of order. "Orcs are re-calibrating the portal now." The dark elf didn't take her eyes off the view screens in her sector as she spoke. "I'm sure we'll catch up!"

"I'll believe that when I see it," Cathy said. "Everyone, go for the inactive dungeon hearts first and protect your imps! They'll dig you a path straight to the target, so keep them alive!"

On the screens, the scenes became more hectic as the troops stepped through the orange glow once more. In a dust-filled tunnel strewn with the debris of tiling, a foreign orc who had been about to use the portal boggled in wide-eyed surprise as he found himself suddenly face to face with a metallic reaper. Behind him, other shadows that had been running skidded to a halt, turned around, and departed the way they had come.

"Minimal resistance," Eline commented.

"Enemies are not engaging," another dark elf said, "aside from the

mindless undead."

Her section of the screens briefly showed a legless skeleton flying past and impacting with the frozen cave wall, shattering both its bones and the ice. In the background, another reaperbot skidded past on the slippery floor, bowling over three of its opponents in the process.

"Bane Group not encountering any resistance," Venna reported. Scratching her head, she added "Also, Rabixtrel ran off on his own. The two may be related."

"Well, that's just-"

The door to the chamber flew open with a thud. "Cathy!"

The swordswoman whirled around to find Jered striding towards her, beaming.

"We won! The high temple of Crowned Death is nothing more than burning wreckage!"

The blonde felt as if a heavy burden head been lifted from her shoulders, and smiled. "Great! Wait, burning? Never mind." She figured that Crowned Death jealously guarding his secrets with a self-destruct mechanism was well within the realm of the possible. Mercury herself certainly made sure that none of her more dangerous inventions could be propagated. Of more immediate concern were her goblins.

Their cheers and hollers swelled until they drowned out every other sound in the chamber as they celebrated.

"Quiet! Shut up, you are still fighting!" Cathy shouted at the top of her lungs in an effort to reassert control.

It took quite a while for the rhythmic banging of fists and feet against metal and the whoops and chants of "Empress!" to die down enough for her to make herself heard.

"You are on a mission, you dim-witted, undersized morons! Get to it!" Red in the face from the exertion, she turned to her boyfriend.

"Argh, I wish Mercury was here. I could use her authority, not to mention her spells. Where is she, anyway?"

The wavy-haired man scratched the back of his neck, his face falling. "Well, there seems to be a tiny bit of a problem..."

Jadeite found Tiger bragging to the warlocks, who watched her with expressions that vacillated between amazement and fascination, but also caution and suspicion. The latter two were quite appropriate, since her appearance had changed a lot since the dark general had last seen her.

Torian, that sycophant of a head warlock, stood right behind her, nodding gravely to confirm her words. His testimony was responsible for the other mages' predominantly respectful reaction, together with the fresh memory of the devastation unleashed upon the temple and the fact that she still resembled herself and Mercury.

This version of the carrot-coloured youma had brushed off all traces of immaturity she had picked up from Mercury and was as tall as Jadeite. At first glance, she seemed to be wearing a tight-fitting bodysuit with sparse black stripes, but closer inspection revealed that her limbs had seams at the joints.

As a dark general, Jadeite was well aware that youma could possess objects. With a sinking feeling, he realised that thickened parts of Tiger's shell reminded him of Mercury's armour. As if he needed any more confirmation about the missing teenager's fate, the crystal ball she had worn as a necklace gleamed like a gem in the centre of the youma's collarbone.

Jadeite's feet were carrying him forward before he realised what he was doing. How dare Tiger twist poor Mercury into this - well, monstrosity wasn't quite the right term, he had to admit as his eyes slid unbidden over the youma's curvy exterior. If this was a promise of what Mercury would look like when she was fully grown, then he had something to look forward to. He blinked and banished the stray thought from his mind. Reaching the circle of warlocks surrounding the youma, he sent two of them sprawling as he pushed his way

through without slowing down. He fixed Tiger with a hot glare. "Explain yourself!"

With deliberate slowness, the tiger-striped creature with Mercury's face turned her head into his direction. "Oh? I have been talking this entire time," she said in a teasing voice. "Haven't you been listening to me?"

Why that impudent little... Jadeite didn't dignify her question with an answer. Instead, he turned in a circle, glowering at each warlock in turn. "You! What are you fools still lingering around here for? There is still an invasion to support! Find Cathy and make yourselves useful!"

The robed magicians shifted uneasily, exchanging nervous glances with each other and alternating between looking at him and at Tiger. "But-" one of them began.

"Now!" the dark general shouted, his eyes blazing white with power.

The warlocks backed away from the grey-uniformed man, reacting as much to the authority in his voice as to the oppressive amount of dark magic he was radiating. Making acquiescing noises, they whirled around, their robes swishing, and headed for the exit like a flock of frightened geese.

Only one of them had remained behind. "Now wait just a moment," Torian said, his nose raised high and his tone indignant. "Show some respect to the Princess, lest she strike you down just as she did to Crowned Death's temple!" The tip of his staff crackled with electricity, and his grip left no doubt that the weapon could be levelled at the dark general at a moments notice.

"You should listen to him, he's a smart one," Tiger commented, showing her teeth.

Torian beamed.

"Smart enough to still remain behind me in case the situation turns violent, I notice," the youma continued, her tone taking on a mocking quality.

"That- um, but Princess," the warlock sputtered. "I didn't-"

Jadeite's patience for the fool was at an end. "Sleep!" he commanded, waving his gloved fingers at his side and focused on Tiger. "Now tell me what happened to Mercury!"

Tiger raised an eyebrow, not reacting to the soft thud behind her. "Awww, are you worried about her? That's so adorable!" She dragged out the last word. "Or at least, *she* would think so. Which she can't. Which you have undoubtedly guessed by now." She demonstratively patted down her rigid sides.

Jadeite reined in the fury he felt rising. "Answer my question! Why in Metallia's name did you possess her?"

The youma grinned at him without a hint of fear, perhaps not noticing his clenching fists. "Oh, that? Well, she got herself into a bit of trouble by letting a dark god into her head. Big sister Tiger to the rescue! I kicked him out, stomped his temple, and dragged her home! Aren't I awesome?"

The dark general suspected that there was a grain of truth in all of this, hidden underneath layers of exaggeration. He crossed his arms and nodded once. It did sound like sufficient justification for what she had done, in any case. "Very well. Release her at once."

"Hmm, let me consider that for a moment." The horned creature rested her chin on her fist in the classical thinker pose for a few seconds. "I refuse. I quite like having power!" she said, an insufferable grin appearing on her face. She leaned forward, her hands steadied challengingly on her armoured hips. "She's sleeping and useless right now anyway. I'll be staying this way!"

Jadeite could feel the youma's breath on his skin, so close was her face to his. "I was not making a request," he growled, tensing up.

"Heh, bring it!" Tiger replied, her blue eyes flooding with power that matched his own. "I may not have gotten all of her Keeper powers, but I can use Queen Metallia's blessing just fine. I'm in charge now, Jadeite, and you had better get used to it!"

The curly-haired blonde fought to keep his calm. He didn't agree with the upstart's assessment of their relative power, but a fight would have been more even than he would have liked. Fortunately, he still had a more effective option than resorting to violence. Standing straighter, he pointed his index finger at the crystal ball within her collarbone. "Should I call her mother and friends to inform them of your decision?"

Tiger jerked back as if slapped, her cocky smirk turning into a glower. "Don't you dare!" She blurted out, her voice hitching. She whirled around so she was facing away from him. "I mean, it would be a waste of time anyway! Why should I care about what they think? Now stop bringing up stupid stuff and go kill some skeletons or something!" Without a further word, she teleported away.

Jadeite blinked at the crumbling icicle where the irritating creature had just stood. His momentary satisfaction at striking a telling blow crumbled as he remembered that she'd taken Mercury along. With a muffled curse, he too disappeared.

"Status report!" Tiger shouted as she appeared next to Cathy on the balcony.

The blonde's eyes widened and her hand went to her sword. "Whoah, right, Jered warned me about your new appearance." The swordswoman relaxed and turned back to the screens.

The brown-haired man to her right demonstrated more of an interest in the youma's new shape, in a way that would have earned him an elbow to the ribs by his girlfriend if she had noticed.

Tiger vaguely felt as if she should cover up as his gaze roamed over her armoured body - which was a fairly irritating feeling when she didn't even *have* any parts that needed to be covered. More importantly, she was not getting the respect she deserved!

Before she could say anything, however, Cathy started answering her question. "Two dungeons secured while their inhabitants were still fighting over who would get to claim their dungeon hearts. Bane

Group was too slow, and now we are dealing with a newly-minted vampire Keeper." Grimacing, she gestured at a section of the wall where several of the screens now looked like regular mirrors. "He's cracking the bots' crystal balls with some sort of sound-based spell if they venture too close to the dungeon heart."

Tiger used her Keeper sight to have a closer look at the situation, just in time to see a reaperbot decapitate an imp peeking out from a short, claimed tunnel. From the arrangement of the troops, she concluded that the few rooms the enemy owned were completely surrounded. "He seems contained for now," she decided.

Cathy nodded. "Fourth dungeon, the reaperbots are being stymied by a ghost-filled crevasse surrounding the dungeon heart, but the other creatures have been chased off and the portals destroyed. The last territory is being invaded by one of Clairmonte's former subordinates who had the same idea as we did. He's sending in zombies-"

A few of the screens displayed a fiery flash just before one of them went blank.

"Graahhh! No-skill cheater! Not fair! Coward rot-worm son of a pig! I kill you next time!" one of the goblins squeaked within his pod.

"-stuffed with explosives," Cathy finished more loudly to make herself understood over the noise of the goblin's tantrum. "In short, we need Mercury to block up the portal they are coming through, to ferry the reaperbots over the chasm, and to order Rabixtrel to stop messing around with the imps and go kill that fucking vampire!" She put her arms akimbo and looked at Tiger expectantly. "Well?

"Why does everyone want *her*? I can deal with this just fine!" the youma said, thrusting one fist into the air.

Cathy and Jered exchanged a dubious glance, the latter shrugging his shoulder lightly.

"What? I'll show you!" Tiger declared. She leapt over the railing, drifting slowly down to the ground floor.

A warlock who had just been about to enter the room stopped to gawk in surprise, causing his colleagues to walk into him.

"Took you all long enough to get here," Tiger addressed the stumbling group still out in the corridor and heading off the brewing argument. "The bunch of you, head over to Anger Group and levitate the reaperbots over that chasm. Oh, and kill the ghosts while you are at it. Eline, show them the way!"

"As you wish, Princess," the warlock closest to her said, bowing his head respectfully.

She'd make sure to remember his fluffy-bearded face for later. After all, those who showed proper deference to her needed to be rewarded. That dark elf who was even now looking for confirmation to Cathy before heading over would definitely not be among that group. With a quick teleport, she reappeared at the swordwoman's side. "That's one down. The vampire situation will fix itself on its own once Rabixtrel gets bored, so no need to do anything there."

"We should not be taking chanc-"

"Finally," Tiger ignored the protest, "I'll have the other youma deal with that incursion. As a group, they'll be able to take down the portal no problem."

"And they'll do what you say?" Jered asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Why would there be any doubt? I've got both the authority and the power to enforce it!" Tiger replied. "They were there when I burned down Crowned Death's temple! Only fools would oppose me!"

Jered shook his head, strands of wavy hair covering his mouth as he muttered something that sounded suspiciously like "Oh dear."

"Well, I still want you to let your sister go! It's not right to take over her life like that!"

"She should be glad I saved her! She's unconscious anyway, so no harm done!"

"No harm done?" Cathy drew herself up to her full height, staring

down at the youma. "She could need medical attention! Who knows what Crowned Death did to her?"

"I do. Now stop bothering me! I have more important things to do, such as arranging my victory party!" Cackling, the youma disappeared, prompting the blonde to bury her face in her palm.

The hooded figure of the spymaster stood in front of the tall window, a dark silhouette before the rising sun. He pulled the silk curtains close because the sunlight glinting off the silver tableware made his King squint uncomfortably. "... and we are still trying to reconstruct what exactly happened," he reported. "Our information is vexingly incomplete."

Albrecht picked at his breakfast, not paying much attention to the salmon-covered bread. "Seems to me that Dumat was right with his theory. Ward hits temple, enchantments go down, something dangerous is suddenly free to blow up. How is Dumat, by the way?"

"Nobody was killed in the accident, though our priests were very busy for a while. Some of the stained masonry will have to be restored, too."

"There you have it," the King said with a shrug. "Some really nasty stuff got out, destroyed the temple, and then our top wizards decided that summoning the leftovers was a really brilliant idea."

"A simple and reassuring explanation," the spymaster admitted. "The problem with it is that it simply couldn't have happened that way, my King. The Shining Concord Empire is absolutely sure that the giant ward did nothing and was destroyed before the explosion."

Albrecht chewed on his meal. "I wonder how they could scry on a temple. Anyway, if not the ward, then *what* caused that explosion?"

"I wish I knew. I would feel much better if I did. The Shining Concord suspects sabotage, though some of our more pessimistic experts fear that Empress Mercury has developed a devastating new spell."

"Good heavens!" Albrecht put down his fork and strode over to the

spymaster. "Please tell me that they are wrong!"

The cowled man nodded. "I am almost certain that they are. It is a consequence of yet another mystery."

"Oh?"

"Empress Mercury disappeared a brief but noticeable time before she could have caused the explosion."

"Disappeared? What do you mean?"

"Crystal balls could no longer show her. Or, to be more precise, they stopped showing the cloud she was conducting the operation from. Since her dungeon remains active, she is unlikely to be dead."

Albrecht tugged at the white hair sprouting from his chin. "That sounds almost as if she was banished."

"An enemy taking advantage of her distraction and destroying one of her dungeon hearts would be the most likely explanation, yes," the spymaster admitted. "Personally, I don't believe it. She disappears during a giant distraction that required the attention of most of our wizards. Her troops begin aggressively advancing into Clairmonte's former territory. Crowned Death's temple is destroyed through some means independent of the plan. All coincidence?"

"Well, if you put it that way..." Albrecht's frown suddenly turned into a smile. "Oh well. The important thing is that the death god's temple was utterly destroyed! I assume the other evil cults have licked blood and will do their best to kick Crowned Death while he is down?"

The spymaster hesitated. "I'm afraid the opposite might happen, your Majesty," he said, folding his hands.

"What? He lost an enormous amount of forces and troops! Why in the world wouldn't his rivals jump on the opportunity?"

"Sire, while he suffered a tremendous loss, it was a loss of assets *nobody else previously knew about.* As far as the balance of power is concerned, the death of Clairmonte weighs heavier than the

destroyed temple. With the spectacular failure of this project, the other dark gods can be certain that he is now last in the race to seize the world. They may focus on interfering with their other rivals now, rather than risking their limited mortal resources against someone who is harmless for the foreseeable future."

"Damn it all!" Scowling, Albrecht shooed a kitten off his throne that prevented him from letting himself drop dramatically onto the cushioned seat. "What does it take to get rid of one of those evil cults for good?"

The cloaked figure shrugged. "The dark empress might just be forced to find out. Crowned Death seems to be seeking vengeance for the ignoble end of his master plan. All of the remaining aquatic undead we are able to track are headed straight toward her coast, and are expected to arrive within four days."

Last edited: Sep 9, 2016

Unholy Dealings

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Camilla peeked around a corner, only one of her golden eyes visible behind the wall. She saw an orc walk past a light in the corridor ahead, arguing with a slightly shorter troll.

From a crossroad further ahead came a rumbling noise, and then three goblins screeched in fright and pressed themselves against the wall to let a barrel roll past. All three of the greenskins shook their fists at the imp running on top of the barrel, poking her tongue out at them.

Finding nothing to be worried about, Camilla continued on her way toward the empress' audience chamber, watching out for more barrels from the side corridors.

The other creatures didn't bother her, though they did stop to gawk at her colourful feather-print dress.

Nevertheless, the young ambassador wouldn't feel safe until she actually reached Empress. Diplomatic immunity or no, there was someone who held a personal grudge against her in this dungeon.

"Now who do we have sneaking around here?" someone asked behind Camilla, making her start.

Hearing the voice of the very person the fairy was trying to avoid, she whirled around on her heel and dropped into a balanced stance that would allow her to doge in several directions if she had to. She blinked as she caught sight of the demonic apparition in orange.

Tiger grinned as she loomed over the fae. "Like the new look? I do so enjoy being tall!"

"Err, it's quite you?" Camilla tried, her wings buzzing nervously behind her. She had no idea why the Empress' sister had turned into what looked like a form-fitting suit of armour with a head, but she

doubted it boded well for her. "Er, you *are* Tiger, right?"

"How nice of you to remember me. Do you also remember setting my hair on fire? Because I certainly do, and I think we really should discuss that." There was nothing friendly about the youma's smile.

Camilla's eyes widened. "Ah, I'm afraid we can't," she said quickly. "You see, I'm here with a message for the Empress! Very important diplomatic mission. Mustn't be delayed. Now if you'd just let me pass, I'll be on my way and-"

"Mercury isn't available right now, so I'm in charge of the dungeon," Tiger said, taking obvious enjoyment from seeing the fairy's face fall.

"Not here? But..." Uh oh, this was bad. Camilla's gaze darted left and right as she looked for a way out. She briefly considered the goblins and orcs who had stopped to watch the confrontation, obviously hoping for some entertainment. She could expect no help from them. "Oh well, in that case I should probably return to my chambers and wait until she comes back, right?" she said with a wide, fake smile, sweating lightly.

"I don't think so. We *are* going to discuss what you did to my hair, now!" the black-striped youma declared, crossing her arms.

"But it grew back already!" the fae protested, pointing with her index finger at the bangs of blue hair that looked a bit straighter than Mercury's, but otherwise the same.

"That's no excuse!" Tiger replied. "Oh, and take this. You'll need it." She tossed a small, glittering object to the fairy, who caught it reflexively.

A hand mirror, Camilla realised, puzzled. She wondered if she should drop it to keep her hands free. Readying herself for action, she shifted her weight forward and formed a fist. "You know, if you really want to have this discussion, then you should remember who won last time," she said with a bravado she didn't quite feel.

Tiger laughed. "A fluke. This time, there won't be any soap in my eyes! Prepare yourself!"

Camilla flinched as the armoured creature grasped at her - only to stare in surprise when the limb slammed into a semi-spherical barrier. Through the ripples of blue light moving outward from the impact point, she could see that Tiger looked just as dumbfounded as she felt.

"Tiger, that's quite enough," a calm male voice said from behind the fairy.

"Jadeite!" the youma hissed, glaring at a spot somewhere above Camilla's left shoulder.

The young ambassador looked in the indicated direction and spotted an arm, its white-gloved palm facing outward in a warding gesture. She took a quick step aside so that she could see both the uniformed man and her assailant. "General Jadeite!" she said, flushing slightly.

"Must you always interrupt my fun? Stop bothering me!" Tiger exclaimed. She fixated Camilla with a stare. "I'll deal with you later!" A column of ice formed around her, hiding her from view before it scattered.

Jadeite stared at the now empty spot, his frown deepening as he slowly lowered his hand.

Camilla's heart kept beating faster than usual as she stared at the curly-haired blonde. "Thank you for saving me," she said, inclining her head slightly. "I was getting worried there. Is it true that she's currently in charge of the dungeon?"

"She certainly thinks so. She has borrowed some of the Empress' power, and it has gone straight to her head," the dark general explained, not looking at Camilla. He produced a crystal ball from a pocket and narrowed his steel-blue eyes at it.

"Borrowed? Wait, where is Mercury? I have a message for her about the battle-"

"I don't have time for that. I've got to catch Tiger before she does something regrettable, rather than just annoying." Jadeite still didn't

look at the fairy and dissolved into a cluster of upwards-shooting vertical lines as she called for him to wait.

"Stop bothering me already!" Tiger demanded when the flash from a teleport briefly projected her shadow onto the wall before her.

"Then stop making trouble and give Mercury back!" the dark general replied, scowling. "What were you thinking, going after that fairy? Are you *trying* to provoke a diplomatic incident?"

"I was only going to glamour her bald!" Tiger replied, turning to look at the dark general. She raised an eyebrow as she spotted Cathy letting go of the grey-uniformed man. "Admit it, it would have been hilarious! Also, she deserves it."

"The ambassador is off limits to you," Jadeite said, his sinister expression unchanged.

Cathy took a step forward on slightly shaky legs. Jadeite's teleport must have disagreed with her. "Seriously, don't you ever think ahead about the consequences of your actions?"

"Excuse me? Did you mistake me for my boring bookworm of a sister?" Tiger asked. It wasn't as if she lived completely in the present, but the future was this vast and nebulous place full of problems that tended to solve themselves most of the time. She could handle the rest when they actually became relevant, so why poison the present with worries about them?

"Please tell me you aren't serious," the swordswoman groaned. She looked as if she would have liked to bury her face in her palm again, but she was wearing heavy gauntlets that would have made such a gesture painful. "Now *please* let Mercury go. Her mind got attacked by a dark god, and she might need medical help! We are all worried about her! You are putting her in danger"

Tiger hesitated. "No, I'm not! She's completely safe where she's now," the youma explained. "Her body was healthy when I took it over, and her mind's not going to get any worse from sleeping. You

should be grateful that I'm taking good care of her!"

"But we could probably wake her up faster if we had her body," Cathy pointed out.

"Eh, just let her rest. I can take over for her for a while just fine!" If she was doing something harmful to Mercury, then the dungeon heart would use its minion link to stop her anyway, right?

"Not good enough. You *are* getting out of that body now, whether you want to or not," Jadeite announced. "And don't even think about running. With that crystal ball being part of your body," he pointed at Tiger's collarbone, "I can track you down anywhere."

"Oh, so that's how it's going to be," Tiger said, narrowing her eyes at him even as they lit up with whitish light. "I guess I'll just have to demonstrate that I'm the strongest and in charge. Even if you brought reinforcements." She indicated Cathy with a slight nod. "Not that I see how a mere human like her could contribute meaningfully," she scoffed.

"Well, last time I went all out in this armour, I fought the Avatar to a standstill," the swordswoman replied, her confident voice distorted by the helmet.

Tiger blinked. That *was* a point she had neglected to take into account. Come to think of it, she didn't know what spells the blonde's sword had been enchanted with. "Wait, wait! This is also Mercury's body," she said, grinning smugly as she patted down her metallic-gleaming sides. "Are you really willing to hurt her too?"

"Well..." Cathy drew out, looking thoughtful, "I do have other options." She took her hands off the haft of the weapon at her belt and crossed her arms as she assumed a familiar-looking pose. "Shabon Spray!"

Tiger flinched away when a blast of bubbles flew from Cathy's hands, quickly filling the room with more impenetrable fog than the bubbles could have possibly contained. Now that she was on the receiving end of the spell, her field of vision had turned into a wall of drab grey.

Even Cathy's startled "Whoa!" sounded muffled by the mist.

"I would be *much* more worried about this if I didn't have Keeper sight, you know," the youma commented as she observed the swordswoman inspecting her ice-covered fingertips. "Thanks for reminding me that I'm not at full power yet, though." The tiger-striped being thrust her right hand in the air. "Mercury Power, Make Up!"

"Don't tell me she can do that too," Jadeite muttered inside the fog.

From Ami's memories, Tiger knew exactly how to trigger the transformation and what it felt like. Sadly, going through the motions had never worked for her before. For a breathless instant, she feared that she had merely made herself look very silly. Then, she felt the familiar rush of icy magic wash over her like a refreshing shower. Apparently, merging with Ami was enough to let her trigger the transformation herself. Another thing her memories told her should be hers had been reacquired!

As the uniform finished forming around Tiger, a sudden impulse struck her. Oh, why not? Grinning she faced Jadeite and Cathy, striking a pose. "Evil rebels who would cut short a hard-working youma's well-deserved regency! In the name of Mercury, I shall punish you!" Hah! The stunned look on Jadeite's face alone made everything worth it! Sailor Moon would certainly approve!

"Oh yeah, we are the rebels now. Because rebels always try to save the rightful empress," Cathy commented.

"She doesn't need saving! She's-" Tiger hesitated, feeling something stir in the back of her mind. *"Oh, did the transformation wake you up?* she asked mentally in the direction of Ami's presence.

The brief feeling of confusion she felt radiating from the girl turned into panic.

"Calm down, it's just me, so don't worr-" "Hey!" Tiger protested out loud when she was yanked through space without warning. "Where are you- stop!"

Wide-eyed, the youma braced herself for impact moments before

she slammed into a curved, glowing surface, bounced off, and dropped to the floor.

Above her, the crystal sphere resting on the backs of three troll statues rumbled and darkened.

"Oh yes, just flee back into the dungeon heart," Tiger muttered as she sat up and rubbed the bump on her head. "Great idea! Except I can't go in there!" A pause. "You aren't listening to me at all, are you?" she complained as she felt herself drawn back to the dungeon heart once again. Briefly, she saw a reflection of red-glowing eyes in the sphere's surface before her face slammed into it. Stuck to the pulsating object like a fly to glue, she could feel Ami struggling to get free. "Ow! Just get out!"

Tiger released her hold on the possessed body before the much more powerful teenager could tear herself free by force. She didn't know exactly what would happen in that case, but it probably wouldn't be pleasant. Even before her form had properly separated into its component parts, Ami's presence suddenly disappeared from her mind, sucked upwards into the dungeon heart. The youma dropped back to the ground, still wrapped in the armour that was now separate from her. "Yargh!"

Ami was smaller than Tiger, and her equipment was sized to fit her. Crushed and squeezed almost everywhere by the constricting suit of armour, Tiger was in too much pain to notice when she struck the floor with a clang. A frantic glamour later, the metal around her shimmered and resized itself. She sat up, sucking air into her lungs and thanking Metallia that her body had still been somewhat malleable from returning to her true shape. It still hurt, damn it! She glared up at the dungeon heart, just in time to spot a human-sized shadow appearing in the white-glowing sphere above her.

An instant later, Ami dropped right into her lap. Startled, Tiger caught the naked girl, her sore arms protesting from the strain. "I should drop you into Jadeite's arms like this for all the trouble you have caused me!" she teased reflexively.

"Head... hurts..." Ami groaned weakly.

The youma took a closer look at the limp form of her adopted sister, a bit disappointed and worried that she wasn't even blushing. Was that blood behind her bangs, trickling down her neck? Holding Ami, Tiger levitated off the ground and teleported. Moments later her loud shout of "SNYYYDER!" echoed through the dungeon.

Ami sat in her bed, her back propped up by a pillow, and stared morosely at her aquamarine covers while Snyder wrapped a bandage around her head. She didn't dare meet the eyes of her advisers, who were standing around her bed with worried expressions.

"I messed up," she sighed. Now Crowned Death was forewarned, and she had squandered the aid of the surface nations! They wouldn't trust her ever again! Her hands tightened into fists, crumpling the fabric of her nightgown. "My plan was a complete failure."

"Well, yes," Tiger commented from her right, sounding inappropriately cheerful. "Ow!"

Ami glanced in her direction, and saw that the youma had fallen victim to an elbow to the ribs from Cathy. Jadeite stood with crossed arms to Tiger's left, his scowl matching that of the swordswoman.

"Don't give her the wrong impression. She must be confused enough already," the scarred blonde scolded.

Cathy was right. The last thing Ami remembered was Crowned Death gloating at her, listing all the ways he would torture her if she didn't give up the information he wanted. It had been a long, long list, and she had no doubt that he would have enjoyed making good on his threats. She shivered. "How did you save me? I wasn't able to do a thing."

"Oh," her adopted sister spoke up, "That was fairly straightforward. I simply blew up his temple."

Ami blinked. It took her a moment to process Tiger's words. She jerked her head to the side and stared wide-eyed at the youma. "What?"

"Careful! You will start bleeding from your ears again if you do not treat yourself with care," Snyder admonished as the sudden movement almost ripped the bandage from his grip.

As if to confirm his words, Ami felt a sudden pain flare up in her temples. Wincing, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

"That's what you get for trying to cook your brain with too much magic, or so I'm told," Jered commented. The wavy-haired man was sitting at Ami's desk, his legs crossed. "And yeah, Crowned Death's temple is gone, so the mission was a complete success after all. Tiger here claims credit for that, not that she's ever gotten around to tell us *how* she did it among all the bragging."

"The temple is...?" Ami trailed off as she had to completely re-adjust all her assumptions. She covered her mouth with her hand as she gaped in disbelief and confusion at Tiger. "How?"

"Well, when you went and got yourself captured by Crowned Death, I bravely possessed you- oh, don't look at me like that. You did it to me often enough!"

Ami closed her mouth. She hadn't even be aware that she *could* be possessed. The idea made her uncomfortable, but things had turned out for the best, or she wouldn't be sitting here now. "Go on?" she said, deciding that she desperately needed more information.

"Well, since Crowned Death had trapped you inside that fiery crown and wasn't paying any attention to me, I used the unattended link to his zombie heart to blow up the temple," Tiger reported proudly.

"What did you do? Use all his gold to replicate adamantine?" Ami asked. That's what she would have tried, perhaps after de-constructing the basin full of liquefied mana at the centre of the temple.

"Nothing as boring as that," Tiger said, waving one hand dismissively as she grinned down at the teenager. "I filled the ship with that awesome substance from one of those chemistry books Rei helped you scan. The one that burns everything. Can't remember its weird name, but there were three fluorides and one

chlorine in it!"

"Chlorine trifluoride," Ami said, paling slightly.

"Yeah, that's it! Expensive stuff, though. I didn't get as much as I wanted." She shrugged. "Oh well, not my money."

"But- there's a reason why I don't use it!" Ami blurted out, horrified. "What if Crowned Death managed to record what you did? It would be a terrible weapon in the hands of Keepers if he told them how to replicate it!"

"I don't really care if they try to make some and set themselves on fire," Tiger said with a nasty grin. "Seriously, what are the odds that they would actually manage to safely contain it?"

"Near-certainty, eventually." Ami let herself sink back into her pillow. It was too late to do anything about it now anyway. "Still, I'm too grateful you got me out of there to complain much about it. Thank you so much for saving me! I'd have been lost without your help," she admitted. Funny how being in the grasp of a dark god could rearrange one's priorities. A new thought struck her. If the temple was destroyed, then- "Cathy, we need to seize Clairmonte's territory!"

"Too late," the swordswoman replied in a deadpan tone of voice.

Ami hung her head. "I see. That will-"

The blonde's serious expression turned into a smile. "And with that, I mean that we already seized it."

"But-" Ami began. She blinked and used the dungeon heart to figure out where her troops were at, finding some of them to be far away from her dungeon. "How long have I been out?"

"A few hours. Tiger here wasn't in any hurry to relinquish your body," Jadeite informed her.

"Well, you were unconscious!" the youma defended herself. "You can't fault me for wanting to enjoy the benefits of being in charge for a while longer!"

"*I* can, and I do," the dark general contradicted.

Ami looked from one to the other, uncertain of what she should think about that. Did anything happen between them while she was indisposed? "Jered, can you give me a succinct summary of what I missed and need to know?"

"Sure." The wavy-haired man sat up straighter. "Cathy sent out the invasion forces as soon as she got news about Clairmonte's death. Torian took him out during a failed rescue attempt shortly before Tiger destroyed the temple."

"Oh." Ami looked thoughtful for a moment. "I think I know when that happened. Crowned Death got distracted briefly for no apparent reason, and he sounded irritated afterwards."

"Are you really all right?" Cathy asked. "You were in the hands of the death god, and..."

"He didn't get around to torturing me," Ami reassured the blonde. "Actually, I suspect he couldn't do more than keep me there and terrify me," she pondered, one hand raised to her chin. "Since I was only there in mind, a hallucination would-"

"Your body sprouted a black fiery crown and tried to eviscerate me," Tiger interrupted.

"Oh," Ami said in a small voice and turned an unhealthy pale colour. "I- I didn't know that. I was lucky he gloated so much, then. Cathy, can you please scan me to see if there's any residue? Tiger too," she added after a moment of reflection. "And my armour and everything else I was wearing, too."

"I'll get right on it," the swordswoman said, touching her right earring. The Mercury goggles slid over her eyes, and she moved to the other side of the bed so she could look at Ami and Tiger at the same time.

"Anyway, Tiger possessed you and did that thing to blow up the temple," Jered filled the silence during the scanning process. "We struck five of Clairmonte's territories, chased off or eliminated the resistance, and disconnected their portals. There were

complications at three of them. Your sister pulled rank to throw your other youma at one of the problems and sent your warlocks to deal with another. Both groups succeeded, but the warlocks suffered some minor ghost-related injuries. Three remain in the infirmary to recover their strength. You'll be happy to learn that the youma remain unharmed." He grinned. "Even Umbra returned with the same number of limbs she left with."

Ami nodded along as she waited for her computer to process the scanning results. "The third complication?"

"A vampire activating one of the inactive dungeon hearts. Rabixtrel destroyed it eventually. Oh, and you should probably find something for him to kill before he gets bored and goes after the reaperbots."

"I'll put him back on ghost-exterminating duty," Ami agreed.

"Your troops are still in the process of looting everything that looks valuable. In the meantime, Tiger has been spending her time organising a victory celebration. Oh, and both Ambassador Camilla and Abbot Durval want to see you."

"I would advise that you get some proper rest first," Snyder said as he finished wrapping the ward-covered bandage around the young empress' head. "Magical overexertion is no laughing matter."

Ami nodded. "I can't see myself successfully handling diplomacy with my current headache." A beep from her computer drew her gaze down to the display. She frowned at the readout, then grimaced when doing so intensified the painful pressure in her head. "Tiger, you need decontamination. I don't know why, but the foreign dark power in my own body is rapidly breaking down."

"Are you sure about that?" the red-and-white dressed acolyte said, looking over her shoulder.

"Definitely. Its getting weaker as I watch."

"Caution suggests that it be treated anyway, just to be safe," the redhead advised.

Ami shook her head, wincing. "I don't think the stress of suppressing

my flight instinct would be good for me in my current state," she protested. "Let's keep observing the contamination until after I had some rest. If it's still a problem at that point, I'll let you remove it."

Snyder fell quiet as he pondered this. Finally, he inclined his head. "That is acceptable. Tiger? Will you follow me outside for treatment, please?"

The striped youma pouted and raised a finger chidingly in Ami's direction. "Yuck. You got death god poison all over me, and I can't even sick Tserk on you this time. It's not fair!" She started walking toward the door. "Oh well, at least I don't have your aversion to healing spells."

"I guess I better go too and make sure Snyder gets everything," Cathy said, tapping her visor with one finger.

"Yes, we have kept you from resting long enough," Jered agreed as he followed his girlfriend.

"I hope you get better soon," Jadeite said with a hint of a smile.

Ami watched his retreating back until he closed the door behind him, feeling slightly better already.

"Youma can possess people?" Usagi squeaked into the crystal ball, her eyes wide.

In her bed, Ami winced at the volume.

"Usagi! Not so loud, or you'll wake your family," Luna admonished as she climbed on the girl's pyjama-clad shoulder.

The blonde turned to face the black mooncat, her long pigtails whipping from the motion. "Luuuna! How am I supposed to fight monsters who are transformed people? I can't just kill them!" she said with watering eyes.

"Hmm," Luna jumped off Usagi's shoulder and landed on the ground, "there is a way to heal someone who has been turned into a

youma," the cat said in a thoughtful tone of voice. Suddenly, she leaped again, doing a backflip in mid-air.

Usagi leaned forward to better see the pink-handled wand that had dropped onto the carpet next to the cat.

"This is the moon stick," Luna explained, sitting down as Usagi picked up the innocent-looking weapon and admired the golden crescent on its tip. "It's the symbol of the leader of the senshi, so treat it with respect."

"How does it work?" Ami's curious voice came from the crystal ball.

"You point the stick at a target and say 'Moon Healing Activation' to heal it and purge it of evil," Luna said.

Usagi weighed the wand in her hand. "Say, Luna, do you think this could turn Ami back to normal when she gets back?" she asked eagerly.

"It's possible," the cat replied, twitching her ears.

"Um, I'd prefer not to take the risk," Ami objected. "Since the dungeon heart keeps me alive, I'm disinclined to experiment with spells that might cut me off from it."

The blonde's face fell, and some colour left her face. "You think I could accidentally k-kill you with this?" Her lower lip was quivering.

"It's not likely," Ami hurried to reassure her friend. "It would probably just get rid of Metallia's influence." *While making me convulse in revulsion*, she added in her mind. "My link to the dungeon heart is very solid, but I'd still want to know more about the dangers before giving it a try. Oh, Luna?" she asked in an attempt to change the topic.

"Yes?"

"There's something weird going on with my senshi powers. Cathy reports feeling a strange jolt when she last used my Shabon Spray, and her fingers ended up covered in ice. Do you know what might be happening?"

Luna started pacing up and down. "This happened after you almost burned yourself out by throwing around more magic than you could handle?"

Ami nodded.

"I think your overuse of magic has forced your senshi powers to prematurely grow to the point where I'd give you this." Luna hopped into the air and did another back-flip. A blue, star-tipped pen landed in front of the crystal ball.

"What's that?" Usagi asked.

"It's a transformation item to properly access and control the additional magic Sailor Mercury now has at her disposal." She looked at the crystal ball and sighed. "Unfortunately, it's here and I can't give it to her. Ami, you should be able to do a new attack, but without this, you'll have to figure out how to by yourself."

"Do you know the name of the attack at least?" the blue-haired girl asked, intrigued.

"Sorry. My memory is still full of holes. I could- Usagi, what are you doing?" Luna suddenly found herself hoisted up by her owner and the room spinning around her.

The pig-tailed blonde held the cat in both hands and flipped her over once more. "Well, I was wondering what other things you had stashed away." She spun the feline around once more, and looked disappointed when no item was produced. "With your memory, you have probably forgotten half of them. I'm trying to help!"

"Cats are not for shaking!" Luna protested. "Usagi! Stop it!"

"But- eep!" The blonde started sweating when Luna unsheathed her claws and grabbed hold of her pyjama sleeves. With reflexes gained through many battles, she threw herself aside when the cat launched herself at her face.

"Get back down here!" Luna demanded, glaring up at the floating girl who pressed her back against the ceiling.

Usagi shook her head, making her dangling pigtails sway. "No way!"

The cat's tail twitched as she circled the teenager like a shark, and from the crystal ball came Ami's soft giggles.

A black-winged figure with pale blue skin stood within a circle of dim illumination, motionless like a statue. Not a single muscle twitched in the dark angel's face, not even when wings flapped in the darkness and another of his kind landed in front of him.

The newcomer's arrival shook the ground, causing some of the blood-coloured rust covering it to flake off and drift away. He folded his wings and slowly rose to his full height, revealing his starved, almost skeletal appearance. The black, frayed trousers covering his legs added to his decaying impression.

The first dark angel, a being of smooth skin and unnatural symmetry, finally deigned to take notice of him. Jagged blue lines and patterns ran down his legs and shifted to remain aligned with their continuations on the ground that zigzagged off into the darkness. In a voice that was female and lacked any inflection, he spoke "Crowned Death. Are you here to submit to my demands?"

"Hardly." The sickly-looking angel sneered, stretching its paper-thin skin so that it became almost transparent. "You are going to create me a device to strike at that insufferable Keeper Mercury, Unraveller!"

"Why would I do that? Perhaps I shall increase the intensity of my attacks to remind you that we are in conflict."

The ground shook again, and a third dark angel stepped out of the darkness. He was half again as tall as the others, with larger horns and prominent muscles. "You will do it because I demand it!" he growled as he took position at the sickly one's side.

"Azzathra. How fitting for you to work as hired muscle." The first creature's voice remained a calm monotone, showing no surprise.

With a roar of rage, the tall brute darted forward and closed a

massive hand around the speaker's neck.

"Unless you have a death wish, you will watch your tongue!"

"I care nothing for the life of this glorified messenger bird," the Unraveller pointed out, her voice coming out as a wheeze through her puppet's squeezed throat.

"But you do care for your own," Crowned Death's messenger said in a hoarse whisper. "Therefore, you will do as we command."

The Unraveller faced Azzathra and pointed at the representative of the death god. "You despise him. It makes no sense for the two of you to cooperate."

"He has come around to my point of view on an issue of general policy," Azzathra said, letting his captive drop to the floor. "Besides, I haven't repaid Mercury yet for depriving me of my favoured dragon." The dark angel's mirthless smile broadened. "Your quarrel with Crowned Death is *over*. You will provide us with what we need, or it will be the end of you!"

"Very well, Tyrant." The Unraveller paused exactly long enough to wipe the triumphant grin off Azzathra's face with her next emotionless words. "Provided you are willing to meet my price."

"You dare make demands in your position?" the brute bellowed.

Crowned Death's mouthpiece moved closer. "It is impossible for you to win against both of us. Stop wasting everyone's time with this useless posturing."

"I will not work for free. It is irrelevant whether or not I would lose a fight against both of you, since I am too fast for either of you to catch me. Now, are you ready to negotiate a deal?"

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Diplomacy and Gifts

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Camilla moved her head to the beat of the music that the humans were somehow managing to coax out of carved flutes, rock drums, and other improvised instruments. No reason she couldn't enjoy herself at the victory feast while waiting for the dark empress to answer her request for an audience. She picked up a fork to convey a slice of the roast pig onto her plate, then dropped the utensil while suppressing a yelp.

The soft ringing noise of the fork striking the wood caused the elderly, round-cheeked woman sitting to Camilla's left to stare at the red mark on the blonde's skin. "So it's true what they say about fairies and iron, then, Ambassador?"

"If they are saying that it burns our skin, yes." The winged girl's sour expression evaporated within seconds, since the good mood around her was contagious. The disruption of a dark god's plan was always a reason to celebrate, but for these victims of Crowned Death, his recent setback had to be incredibly satisfying. She said a quick incantation that removed the blisters on her skin, wrapped a piece of cloth around her hand and stabbed at the meat again.

"Is that the kind of thing you are teaching my little Percy at school?" a smiling man wondered, attracted by the white glow. He was sweating, having just arrived from the crowd of dancers filling the town square.

Camilla blinked and looked him up and down. Despite the toga-like brown cloth wrapped around him, he was easily recognisable as a farmer by his tan. It took her a moment to see the family resemblance between him and one of the little boys that attended her classes. "You mean the magic? No, he's too young for that. I'm teaching reading and writing, mostly."

"Ah, I see. He's doing well, then?" He took a seat on the empty chair next to her, which wobbled under his weight.

The fairy nodded. "He's a bit ahead of his peers, I think. Very well-behaved."

The man's smile widened. "He's such a good boy. If I could only say the same thing about his brother." The peasant shook his head. "Teenagers. He's actually stupid enough to fall for the dark empress' tricks. Just yesterday, he said that working for her might not be so bad. After all that happened, the little moron somehow forgot that Keepers are evil." He snorted. "He can be happy that we aren't back home, where such talk would be treason."

"Eh, King Albrecht never built us a nice house with running water," the woman to Camilla's left said.

"Shut up, Grisella. I bet you are the one who filled his head with this nonsense in the first place!"

"Nonsense? Just look around you! See?"

The peasant turned and twisted, trying to spot something out of the ordinary. "What are you talking about? I don't see anything special!"

"But you do see! With eyes she gave you!"

The man's face reddened in anger. "Foolish woman! That's just another invisible chain for us!"

Grisella raised her voice too as she glared at him "Are you calling me a fool, you uneducated buffoon?"

Camilla became uncomfortably aware that both of her neighbours had breath that smelled of alcohol. She had little choice in noticing this, because both of them were leaning in closer to glower at each other right above her plate. Trapped between the two, she stood up and said loudly "Would you two mind *not* shouting into my ears?"

Reprimanded, both of them backed down with embarrassed expressions.

"Sorry, Ambassador."

"Yes, I shouldn't let him get me riled up like that. Say," the woman

bought her mouth closer to the fairy's ear, "you get more news from the outside world than we do, maybe you can confirm something I heard from my sister, who heard it from a guard, who overheard some warlocks talking. There's supposed to be an army of a hundred thousand giant undead monsters getting ready to attack this place!"

"Don't go spreading silly rumours, Grisella," the man intruded. "Your sister is the biggest rumour-monger in town! Remember the time she convinced you someone had grown a tail after eating the empress' bread?"

"Nobody asked you!" the woman hissed.

In the hopes of finally getting to taste her food, Camilla shook her head rapidly. "That rumour is wrong. There can't be more than a few hundred of the big ones left after what Empress Mercury did to the temple."

"But there *is* such an army coming here to kill everyone?"

Camilla blinked as she suddenly found herself face to wrinkled face with the worried woman, who had grabbed her by both shoulders. What had- oh! Oops. Perhaps she shouldn't have enjoyed so much cider herself? "Um, yes? But-" she continued, talking very quickly "there's no reason to get worried! Do keep in mind that Empress Mercury just defeated a much larger group of them, outside of her territory, without an army! Besides, they are big aquatic zombies. If they go on land..." she mimed a flopping motion with one hand. "Also, they don't even fit into the tunnels!"

"Are you sure about that?" the peasant from before asked, not yet reassured completely.

"Of course. They are coming here because the death god is so angry he isn't thinking straight. They'll be easy pickings for the dungeon's defences!" Camilla hoped she could calm the gathering eavesdroppers down. She didn't want to make them think about diseases carried by the rotting husks, or about many slimy tentacles wielding enchanted picks. "Look, empress Mercury has consistently beaten Crowned Death's forces every time they have clashed. Why

would it be different on her own lands?"

"I suppose you are right. When you put it like that, it does sound a bit silly to be afraid, right?" Grisella's laugh sounded somewhat forced.

The rest of the crowd made relieved and affirmative noises as it dispersed.

Good. The blonde fae felt a wave of relief about not having caused a panic. The dark empress wouldn't have liked that. Another drink to relieve the tension sounded like a great idea. She reached for the mug and promptly choked on the apple-tasting liquid when she heard Mercury's voice in her head, startling her.

"Ambassador Camilla, please come to my study for your requested audience."

Ami was in a good mood after her rest. Despite all the mistakes, the temple assault had turned out for the best, and she felt refreshed enough to deal with the intricacies of diplomacy. She also enjoyed the wild, drumbeat-heavy music that came from the party deep below. Her smile widened, which caused her two visitors to exchange uneasy glances and sink deeper into their upholstered chairs.

Durval cleared his throat. "As I was saying, the Light and associated nations are highly unsettled by your aggressive deployment of troops into overseas territories while everyone was distracted by Crowned Death's high temple."

"It wasn't my intention to scare anyone," Ami explained. "I took the opportunity caused by Keeper Clairemonte's death to seize his territories before anyone else could."

"You are, of course, going to withdraw your troops after neutralising those dungeons, then?" The white-bearded abbot asked.

"Unfortunately, strategic considerations make such a move inadvisable at this time. I need to have sufficient mobility to react to

the enemies you warned me about," the blue-haired girl said.

Camilla sucked in a surprised breath and stared at Durval, who narrowed his eyes.

"Your presence will be interpreted as a threat by the neighbouring rulers, no matter your intentions, your Majesty," the old man replied.

"Well, I have no plans to re-establish the dungeon hearts in those territories. Sorry, but that is the best I can offer right now."

Durval frowned. "I see. Perhaps you would be willing to divulge where you disappeared to during the battle to show good faith?"

"Disappeared?" Ami sat up in surprise. "Could you clarify, please?"

Durval tilted his head to the side in surprise. "The period during and after the battle in which you were hidden from scrying detection," he elaborated.

Up until this point, Ami hadn't even considered the possibility that getting possessed would interfere with scrying methods. She still existed, after all. She blinked twice while her mind raced, considered the implications. "This is news to me," she admitted. Were there possible applications? Could she lose those applications if she divulged what had happened?

"Are you serious?" Camilla blurted out. Then, seeing Durval's disapproving look, she bowed her head, her cheeks burning. "Please excuse the interruption."

"It is all right, Ambassador. I was just about done, anyway. I shall need some time to sort out my thoughts."

"Oh. Good." Camilla sat up straighter to indicate that she was speaking in her official role now. "Your Imperial Majesty. My Emperor made it clear that he insists on being informed about what exactly you did to sink Crowned Death's temple. He has very solid evidence that your plan involving the giant ward failed completely."

"Oh, he insists?" Ami said before she could stop herself. In her defence, that had sounded awfully entitled.

Camilla shrugged. "It's my duty to let you know that my Emperor is considering diplomatic sanctions in case you do not comply with his reasonable request," she said, carefully watching Ami for her reaction.

Ami noticed that the tips of the fairy's folded wings were vibrating, betraying her nervousness. Given that any such sanctions would involve the embassy, for lack of other options, the young fae would be affected by the consequences no matter what.

"Actually, I have thought about this for a while," Ami said, smiling again, "and I see no reason why I should keep the key factor in my victory a secret. Please wait a moment."

Using her Keeper senses, she searched for her chief warlock. She wasn't surprised to find him and the other warlocks near the food-laden tables. Where else would he be? Sit with the drunken goblins around their bonfire? Dance with the trolls and orcs? Wait, was that a dance or a brawl? Ami watched for several seconds, but couldn't tell either way. At least they seemed to be having fun. Perhaps she might have found Torian in one of the dark, secluded corners that she was very carefully not looking into. That could have been embarrassing. Fortunately, he was out in the open, though he did have a female companion.

"Oh, come on! With all the chanting you do, you got to have a good singing voice! Let's hear it!" Tiger shouted, one hand on the chief warlock's shoulder while holding a large mug in the other.

Torian shot a venomous look at his colleagues, who were laughing at his predicament.

Ami allowed herself a small chuckle too as the black-bearded man's eyes darted around in their sockets, searching for a way out.
"Torian, may I have a moment of your time?"

The beleaguered warlock was quick to agree. "Sorry, Princess. Duty calls!" With that, he disappeared into thin air, leaving a pouting youma behind.

Her predatory gaze fell onto the remaining warlocks, who suddenly

found the situation much less amusing.

Torian bowed to Mercury as soon as she dropped him off before her desk, and also greeted her guests with a quiet nod when he spotted them. "Your Majesty. How may I serve you?"

"Can I please have your notebook for a moment, Torian?"

"Of course." He fished it out of one of his robe's pockets and held it out. "Here."

"Thank you." At a wave of Ami's hand, the booklet slowly drifted over to Camilla. "Page nineteen."

The fairy reached for the notebook with three fingers, moving slowly as if it might bite her. When she opened it to the indicated page, Durval didn't even try to hide his interest and almost fell off his chair trying to get a look at the text. "It's..." Camilla said in a quiet voice as she read. "I- I can't make head nor tail of this," she admitted after a while.

Ami, who had been smiling in anticipation, covered her mouth with her hand. "Well, I suppose Torian's handwriting can be somewhat challenging at times."

"That's not it," the fairy said. "I can see it's a spell, but what does it do?"

"May I?" Durval asked, holding out his hand.

Camilla handed the booklet over without complaint.

He quickly scanned the passages, his eyes narrowing. "Hmm, I cannot tell what this spell does at a glance, either. Some of its sections look familiar, but others are completely foreign to me," he muttered.

"That would be Jadeite's contributions," Ami said. "I have noticed that his methods are fairly different from the local ones."

"Indeed?" Durval raised one eyebrow. "I confess to a certain curiosity about where you found a sorcerer with his extraordinary

abilities."

Ami ignored the implied question. "In any case, this is a spell for controlling the undead."

"Controlling the undead? That's how you did it?" Camilla asked, looking up at Ami.

The blue-haired girl nodded, still smiling. "After the initial infiltration, it was simply a matter of sabotage, misdirection, and luck that brought the vessel down," Ami explained. *Mostly luck though,* she admitted to herself.

"Oh, so that's why you aren't more worried about the horde of undead beasts coming here, either!" Camilla realised.

"Well, they are aquatic. They may capsize my iceberg, but I'm more worried about other troops that may accompany them. Without support, they are not going to achieve much."

"I see. That does partly answer my Emperor's question, but what about the fire that consumed the ship?" the fairy continued.

"Certain conditions present in the vessel made it possible," Ami replied, keeping her answer deliberately vague. She was less worried about the damage the truth would do to her reputation than about giving Crowned Death enough hints to figure out what Tiger had done. It was sad and a bit unfair that her sister's heroic rescue would go largely unappreciated, though. "I refuse to go into further detail."

Camilla looked disappointed, while Abbot Durval nodded slowly, as if thinking.

"Oh, and feel free to keep and distribute the spell - that goes for you too, Abbot," Ami added.

The fairy's eyes widened. "Really?"

Torian gasped. "My Empress, that - divulging it to the surfacers- Crowned Death will be furious!"

"I think after taking this realm from the undead, stopping his avatar from entering the world, turning the power source for the Calarine staves into collateral damage, revealing the existence of undead dungeon hearts, and destroying centuries of work on his master plan, he can't really get any angrier at us," Ami pointed out.

Torian winced with each point his empress listed. "Y-yes, your Majesty. You are, of course, right. However, I am starting to wish the spell wasn't named after me."

"The price of fame," Durval chuckled. "In any case, if this spell works as advertised," his wrinkly face lit up, "then it has the potential to change the face of the world. Why raise the undead or worship the death god if they can simply be turned against you? This could be a harder blow to Crowned Death's agenda than even your destruction of his high temple!"

Torian let out a whimper.

"Ahhh, hot water. You know, when I was traipsing around through the snow with that smelly band of orcs, it was one of the things I missed most," Jered exclaimed as he brushed with his fingers through his wet hair.

"And here I thought you'd miss me more than the shower," Cathy said as she wrapped her soft arms around him from behind.

"That goes without saying," Jered answered quickly.

"But I like hearing you say it!" the blonde protested.

He was somewhat disappointed when she let go after a brief kiss on the nape of his neck. In the steamed-up mirror, he watched her lean body as she left the shower stall and started towelling herself off.

Only slightly more serious than before, Cathy asked "Now, are you telling me the dwarfs didn't have any baths? You haven't been talking much about their hospitality." She tossed him a dry towel, which he caught with practised ease.

"They don't have hot water, or at least they don't waste it on guests," he grumbled. "I'm still not sure if they were serious about cuddling with their big, slobbering dogs to get warm," he continued, scowling. "And please don't ask me about their transportation. Just don't. I've had about as much of the passive-aggressive little bastards as I can stand." Done drying himself, he followed Cathy into the adjacent bedroom. "If I never see a neck-high ceiling again, it will be too soon!"

A suppressed laugh escaped from Cathy's lips.

"Yes, great, laugh at my pain," Jered complained as he gathered his clothes "If you ever visit them, I'll have the last laugh. You are taller than me!" he concluded triumphantly.

"Oh, but I'll just order the goblins to carry me around on a palanquin," the towel-clad blonde replied, smirking. "No hitting my head or stooping for me!"

"Heh, I bet they'd do it, too," the wavy-haired man said with a wry grin. He paused briefly, during which he contemplated the fluffy carpet underneath his feet, the luxurious double bed big enough for four, and the sheer size of the well-heated and decorated room. "It's sure nice being in charge."

"Pays much better than adventuring, too," Cathy agreed. She stepped closer to him and put her hands on his shoulders. "So, it's been a busy few days. How's your back now? Still sore from stooping all the time?

Jered felt warm thumbs circle the skin between his shoulder blades. "Why yes, yes it is."

"Maybe you'd like a massage to make it better?"

"That does sound like a terrific idea," Jered agreed happily.

The hands withdrew. "Great! I'll get you an appointment with Tserk, then," Cathy declared in a cheery voice.

"Gah?" Jered sat down on the bed with a pout. "You are a cruel, cruel tease!" he whined.

"And you are about to be late for your meeting with Mercury. Remember not to call the dwarfs 'hairy little bastards' where she can hear you, yes?"

When Jered arrived at the meeting room, Jadeite was already sitting at the round table. He greeted the wavy-haired man with a nearly imperceptible nod and resumed reading the sheets before him.

A bit off to the side, Snyder stood in front of his usual chair, his back facing the entrance. He was staring at a grey rat that sat before him on the polished marble surface, right next to his writing utensils. Slowly, he extended one hand toward the animal, who ducked low and pressed itself tightly against the cold stone, its nose twitching as the limb got closer.

From point-blank range, Snyder's palm emitted a bright white pulse of light that enveloped the rodent.

With a frightened squeak, the rat jumped backwards, cartwheeling in mid-air. Its tail whipped left and right as it sprinted away from the acolyte, crossed the table, and skidded off the edge on the other side.

"Harsh, Snyder," Jered laughed. "Remind me to never steal your spot at the table!"

The redhead looked at him over his shoulder, his face serious. "That has nothing to do with it. We are performing valuable and useful research here."

"I bet," the wavy-haired man said with a grin, noting that Jadeite had leaned slightly to the side and caught the rat in one hand before it could hit the ground.

"Though that doesn't make it any less ridiculous," Jadeite added in a deadpan voice as he lifted the rodent back into sight.

The rat sitting on his white-gloved palm shot him an insulted look, squeaked in protest, and raised its snout into the air like a haughty noble. Red light gleamed within its half-closed eyes.

"Indeed," Jered said, amused. "I'm afraid any pretence of dignity is being sabotaged by your fur still standing on end, your Majesty."

The young Keeper turned her head to stare at him. Taken unaware, she started when a large finger touched her back and began smoothing out her ruffled fur.

"So what's this about?" Jered asked the redhead while Jadeite got up from his seat and turned toward the bookshelves. The brown-haired man noticed one of Mercury's visors propped up against a heavy tome.

"We are removing what little is left of Crowned Death's energies in her system," Snyder explained. With a small smile, he added "You may have noticed that there is a lot less screaming and kicking involved than last time."

"She seems downright comfortable," Jered agreed, grinning at the rat sprawled out on the dark general's palm while being moved back and forth in front of the scanner.

Mercury reopened her eyes and slowly, almost reluctantly got to her feet. In an instant, she disappeared from the dark general's palm and reappeared on the carpet near his boots. With a low crackle, a crimson-eyed pillar of darkness mushroomed upwards from the animal, solidifying into a short-skirted girl. "Ah, thank you," she said to Jadeite, her cheeks a faint red. "That should be enough data." She turned toward Snyder and wrapped her arms around herself, the pale colour of her skin contrasting with the black of her leotard as she mock-shuddered. "Brrr, that wasn't really any more pleasant than last time. Only shorter."

"Your reaction implied that," the acolyte said, grinning. "We did manage to cleanse all of you in one go, however. If the treatment carried through to your normal form, of course?"

Ami retrieved her Mercury computer and started typing. "Well, the rat is clean," she said after consulting the readout. She walked up and down a few times in front of her detached goggles before stopping, then nodded. "I can't detect any more traces of contamination." With a smile, she touched her right ear, causing the

visor to disappear.

"Good." Jered's chair made a muffled scraping noise as he pulled it out and sat down. "You wanted to talk about my expedition to establish trade relations with the dwarfs?

"Yes," the teenager said as she made her way over to her seat. "I have read your report on the various holds and fortresses already." A brief gesture, and a huge map unrolled itself, covering the wall canvas meant for presentations.

Jered immediately recognised the northern mountains of his home continent, where he'd recently spent some time before Mercury called him back.

Ami pointed at the central region of the half-moon shaped mountain range, which was covered in red dots. "I've marked the different settlements according to your classification. The entire kingdom of Nimbadnur is unable to trade with us? Can you get them to change their mind?"

"Well, that's going to be tricky. I had to work through delegates there, since they'd arrest me on sight. Not only do they not want to deal with us, they legally can't. Ever since Baron Leopold had to save them from their Keeper-backed rebellion, their laws -" Jered stopped, considering his words. "Well, overly zealous describes them accurately. They'd probably have to lock away your guests too if they ever set foot on their lands."

"That's really inconvenient," Ami said, taking a note. "By all accounts, they are the richest of the three kingdoms, *and* they have the special obsidian required for the embassy."

"Just use some substitute," Jadeite suggested. "Who'll be able to tell the difference between two different kinds of black rock anyway? Hiring some dwarf to tell everyone who investigates that it is truly the correct stone is probably cheaper, anyway."

"That does seem a little dishonest," Ami objected, looking for Jered's opinion.

He didn't think any Shining Concord dignitaries ordered to come here would be concerned about the masonry. Not when complaining about it would gain them the displeasure of the local Keeper, who also happened to be an empress. "Works for me. If the dwarfs don't want to sell to us..."

The teenager jotted down another note. "It's not a pressing issue, so I'll keep the suggestion in mind for later."

"Good. Completing the embassy shouldn't be a priority right now anyway," Jered said. "I took a brief look at the treasury, and the gold level is way down. I didn't realise you spent *that* much on those spells against Crowned Death."

"It will be back to its original level in less than three days," Ami said, not sounding too worried. "Now, all those yellow dots," she waved her hand, indicating the markers spread evenly over the rest of the mountain range, "are the settlements you claimed do not want to trade with us."

"Well, that's over-simplifying things," Jered said. "It certainly includes those who sneered at me a lot while loudly proclaiming that they would never trade with - I quote - Keeper scum. However, I also included those who I think would take our money, not deliver anything, and consider it a good deed."

Ami blinked.

"Depriving a Keeper of resources *is* typically a laudable action," Snyder elaborated, nodding along.

"They can't know you are an exception, Mercury," Jered agreed. "Anyway, that category also includes those who are refusing your offer for political reasons, be it recalcitrant lieges, wary neighbours, or not having been asked first." He paused for a moment. " Well, or lack of sufficient bribes."

"Bribes? We do have a surplus of sapphires with exceptional size and quality," Jadeite pointed out.

Jered grinned. "Yes, they could be quite useful in gaining their

cooperation."

Mercury's crimson-glowing eyes narrowed slightly. "But we also have the option of doing everything completely legally, right?" She pointed at the single green dot at the south-eastern edge of dwarven territory.

"Sirith Anlur. It's technically part of Kransley, but they were more cooperative from the start than their countrymen. I even got to negotiate with their Baron himself - through an intermediary, of course, since you might possess me at any time, but still."

"That sounds promising," Ami said, her face lighting up.

Jadeite flipped through the pages of the report before him, then asked "Quite a change from the arrogance displayed by the other holds. Why the different attitude towards us?"

The wavy-haired man shrugged. "I'm not sure. They seem poorly-regarded by the other dwarfs, so they could be desperate for the fame that creating a new imperial crown would gain them."

"You weren't able to find out what earned them their bad reputation?" Mercury asked.

"Could be a discrimination thing. They do have slightly fairer skin than the other dwarfs." He was speculating now, because he hadn't been able to dig up anything incriminating in their history. "I certainly couldn't discern anything wrong with their craftsmanship. Definitely a match for the skill of the other dwarfs, as far as my human eyes can tell."

"Well, quality is nice, but a secondary concern," Mercury said. "My objective remains learning how to properly work adamantine."

"So you aren't interested in the samples of their craft that they offered?" Jered asked, raising both eyebrows and pressing his lips together in an exaggerated pout. "I obtained those at great cost to myself, you know. Diner with a dignitary who liked fermented mushroom brew. Eww."

"You mean the wooden box in the quarantine cave?" Mercury

asked.

"Yes, did you open it?"

"No, I simply scanned it along with the other suspect goods, but you have convinced me to have a look right now." Reaching out with both hands, she caught a suitcase-sized box with rounded edges that appeared out of thin air. Gently, she put it down, careful not to scratch the table's surface. A flick of her fingers opened the metal latch, revealing a great mass of tightly-packed straw that cushioned the goods within.

Snyder's chair creaked as he leaned forward to get a better look at the first item that Ami pulled from the container.

The teenager's eyes widened slightly as she turned the mug in her hand slowly between her fingers. "This is made from plain regular rock?" she asked, sounding incredulous as she admired the shiny object from up close. Its surface was smooth but irregular, varying in thickness in order to produce tiny pictures of dwarfs from the stone's natural patterning.

"Yes, dwarfs can do some amazing things with stone. It took me over an hour to realise that the engravings in my room were covered over and over with mana-draining wards," Jered said. He recognised the soft, thin package that Mercury pulled out of the box next. "Wait, don't open that!"

Ami froze and looked at him questioningly.

"It's a display of tailoring skill. While it indeed uses very little silk to create something beautifully elaborate, I rather suspect that this gift was inspired by the more unfortunate parts of your reputation." Besides, he wanted to keep it for Cathy, who would undoubtedly look great in it.

"Oh." Mercury understood what he meant, if the colouring of her cheeks was any indication. Or perhaps she had simply used her Keeper senses to peek. In any case, she produced the next item from the box instead. "Earrings? Ohhh!"

Jered thought that right now, Mercury looked as young as she really was - just a delighted girl admiring the way the light sparkled within the swan-shaped hollow inside the cut amethyst.

"I can see individual feathers! And they craft this by hand? They certainly seem like a good choice for creating my crown. Jered, do you see any reason not to commission the crown from them?"

"Yes, actually," the wavy-haired man said, causing Merury's face to fall. "Any time I steered the topic towards incorporating adamantine into the crown's design, the negotiators became nervous and evasive. When I pressed the point, they seemed fairly distressed. They didn't outright admit it, but I wouldn't be surprised if they either didn't have any adamantine, or didn't know how to work it."

"So they can't give us what we need either? Darn it!" Mercury lowered her head, looking disappointed as well as mildly embarrassed by her outburst.

"It seems we need to find a way to convince the reluctant mountainhomes to trade with us, then," Snyder summarised the situation.

"Not exactly," Jadeite contradicted, causing Ami to give the curly-haired man her full attention. "Mercury, there is no way you can gather the amount of adamantine you need through legal channels. Perhaps it could be done if each individual settlement was willing to trade with you, but as the situation stands," he indicated the map covered in red and yellow, "it's not going to happen. You'll have to dig out your own adamantine sooner or later, which means intruding into dwarven territory."

"But..." Ami started to protest, but didn't finish the sentence. She lowered her eyes, apparently unable to find a good counter-argument. After a while, she asked softly. "Then what do you suggest? That we just kidnap a dwarven metalsmith and get the information out of him?" Her frown made it clear that she didn't approve of such a course of action.

"There are less objectionable ways to go about it," Jadeite said. "I'm sure that with the right incentive, one of their master smiths could be

convinced to join you."

"Tricky," Jered commented. "They enjoy an elevated status in dwarven society, and that kind of respect is not something given up easily. It's also a problem of trust. They have little reason to believe that you will keep your promises and not toss them aside once they are no longer useful to you." He paused, thinking. "It might be easier to go for their criminals. There's got to be someone in prison somewhere who won't complain overly much."

Ami started massaging her temples. "How did we get from discussing potential trade partners to plotting prison breaks? Anyway, I have to think about all of this. I'm not going to jeopardise diplomatic relations by doing something rash. Thank you all for your time, meeting adjourned."

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For Science

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Mukrezar languished on his throne with a glass of wine in his hand, flanked by two loyal mistresses who were moving large, feather-covered fans up and down. He had put the half-starved former leader of the Underworld city to good use dancing for him. That would teach the silly orc chief to drag out the inevitable capitulation for so long. It was a shame that the lesson wouldn't have any lasting impact, since the 'dance' involved a floor of glowing coals and severed vocal chords.

Mukrezar regretted the necessity, he really did. The screams were the most relaxing part, but they would have interfered with his current business. "High priest, you know what she did to your temple," he told the jewel-encrusted skull in the crystal ball. "In fact, you know it better than me, since I only have second-hand accounts. So much fire! Are you absolutely sure she doesn't worship Isubiar?"

"The god of flames was not involved," the skeleton replied. It had no facial expression to read, but it sounded irritated.

How unfortunate. For that kind of power, he'd have converted in a heartbeat. "Well, if she did it all on her own, it's even worse! How do you expect me to fight something like that with my current means?"

"Satisfactorily," the bone priest quipped. "Make it work, or you shall incur our Lord's wrath."

Now that doesn't take much these days, the pink-haired elf thought. "Yes, well, I was hoping for some support. Make that a lot of support. I already have a plan for avoiding sudden, fiery death, of course. I'm not the greatest Keeper in the world for nothing. What I need is your very best troops to make it work."

"Out of the question. Use your own," the high priest replied immediately. "It shouldn't be that hard for the greatest Keeper in the world to acquire some well-trained minions."

"I don't have the *time* to whip my wretched new recruits into shape," Mukrezar pointed out sourly. "That's a simple consequence of giving me a deadline."

"Tell me about this plan," the voice from the scrying device demanded.

"And have you steal it to claim the credit? It's not going to be *that* easy." Mukrezar smirked and crossed his arms, staring into the death priest's empty eye sockets defiantly.

"You will have to manage with what you have, then. A pity."

"Oh?" The pink-haired Keeper narrowed his eyes. "Guess whose head would be on the line if I tried, failed, and it was obvious that my plan would have worked splendidly if I only had obtained the forces I requested. Let me give you a hint. The unfortunate fool who could have easily provided them is going to regret his decision for a long, long time."

"I remain sceptical that you could achieve something with our troops that we couldn't on our own," the high priest argued.

"Oh, are you questioning Crowned Death's wisdom in bringing me back now?" Mukrezar said with a smug grin. "He certainly saw some potential in me that he didn't see in you, or I wouldn't be here right now."

"I would not-"

"That's it, isn't it? You are going against his wishes out of petty jealousy!" Mukrezar hid his glee as he heard the high priest grind his teeth.

After a moment of silence, the skeleton asked with barely concealed frustration "What do you need?"

"Any dark angels and skeletal mages you can get me. Dragons would be nice, too. No vampires, I'll not be able to get them across the ocean. Death priests, as many as possible. A bunch of shock troops, such as undead knights and mummies. It's important that they are all intelligent. Anything that cannot think for itself will be

more of a hindrance than it will help."

The high priest's skull was an unreadable mask. "Do you have anything else to convince me that your secret plan has a chance of working?"

"Well, let's just say that I've come upon a number of useful artefacts during my successful career, and hadn't stashed them all on the Avatar islands. I am not going to tell you anything more, because the plan relies on surprise. Empress Mercury has already proven that she is able to figure out even the greatest of your secrets."

"I shall commune with our Master on this," the high priests stated, and the crystal ball went blank.

Slow clapping came from behind the throne, and the butler imp walked into sight. "A convincing performance, your Greediness. Would you have gotten on your knees and begged if he had been more stubborn, Master?"

"I am perfectly willing to forego dignity where it serves my needs," Mukrezar said. "Coincidentally, one of my particular needs is not being set on fire by an Avatar-stomping, inventive menace of a scheming Keeper. Or anyone else." He sniffed the air, which smelled of smoke and burnt flesh. "Something at which my tiresome prisoner sadly failed."

"You missed some hilarious spasms and jerks, Master," the butler commented, circling the pit in which a prone body sizzled and burnt on the coals. With his hands crossed behind his back, the suit-wearing imp returned to Mukrezar's throne. "Your Deviousness, do you think the high priest will give you the troops?"

Mukrezar stretched on his padded seat, his smile widening. "If Crowned Death wants Mercury gone as much as I think he does, then yes. And once I have them... believe me, this plan is going to be one for the history books!"

"What did you drag me all the way over here for?" Tiger complained,

rolling her bloodshot eyes as she crossed her arms. "It's too hot, the flies are making too much noise, and my head hurts!"

"How did you even manage to get a hangover?" Jadeite asked through the small crystal ball that Ami wore as a necklace. "I didn't even know youma could get drunk!"

"Wasn't easy," the tiger-striped being grumbled. She pointed at the blue-haired girl walking next to her. "I blame her. Stupid more human-like body."

"Sorry?" Ami said, side-stepping a fungus-covered root that protruded into the crypt-like halls from the ceiling.

"Serves you right. Getting drunk at parties is not really appropriate behaviour for princesses," Jadeite mocked.

"Well it should be!" Tiger contradicted. "Can't you make it a law, little sister?"

"It wouldn't hurt if you acted more dignified occasionally," Ami answered.

"I'm not the one who put a crystal ball right over her cleavage," Tiger retorted, indicating Ami's necklace with a nod.

The teenager's red-glowing eyes flitted downwards to her chest, which was, of course, adequately covered by the black fabric of her leotard and her ribbon. She'd have to do some unlikely acrobatics to have the sphere catch a glimpse of something it wasn't supposed to. Nevertheless, she felt her cheeks heat up at her adopted sister's words. "Tiger!" she shouted, scandalised.

"Ow. Not so loud!" the youma whimpered as the echoes faded into the deeper catacombs.

"In any case, I need your help with an experiment." Ami reached into the small basket she was carrying and pulled out one of her lab rats.

The large rodent puffed out its black fur and bared its lower teeth as she thrust it toward the youma.

"Hostile little fleabag."

"It's the biggest, most vicious one I could find," Ami confirmed as she strapped a control block the size of two sugar cubes to the animal's back. "It will need to be tough for this."

"And where do I come in?" Tiger asked wile the rat watched her with unconcealed suspicion.

Ami told her.

"Wait, what?" the black-striped youma leaned down, bringing her face very close to Ami's.

Confused, the younger girl blinked and drew away. "What are you doing?"

Tiger sniffed. "Strange, your breath doesn't smell as if you had been drinking." She put her arms akimbo. "Now run that by me again. Particularly the part *why* you'd want me to glamour the fuzzball into a magic-using rat."

"Not a magic-using rat, exactly," Ami corrected. "Having a large reservoir of magical power is one of the requirements for bonding with a dungeon heart."

"So I did hear right the first time." Tiger pointed her index finger at the animal, who struggled to wriggle free from her sister's grasp and nip at the digit. "You want to turn *that* into a Keeper?"

"Well, I have four inert dungeon hearts that I need to get rid off. I might as well learn all I can from them, and that's the only way I can study the bonding process," Ami explained, sounding more confident than she really was. She had no idea if this could work. Did rats have a soul? Was one required in the first place? Would the process work if the animal didn't know what it was doing, even if the routines inscribed into its backpack would tell it how to proceed? Only one way to find out, really. "So, if you could please meld the rat with this?" she asked, holding up a gem filled to the brim with dark energy.

Tiger snickered. "A rat Keeper." She shook her head, then

shrugged. "Oh well, the faster we are done here, the faster I can get out of this stinking, sweltering jungle ruin. Let's do it. What's the worst that could happen?"

"Shut up! Shut up shutupshutup!" Tiger rapid-fired stone shards from both hands, alternating between left and right."Cease that infernal screeching! And stop laughing, Jadeite!"

One of her inaccurate projectiles finally found its mark, punching a hole through the head of one of the four berserk imps defending their master's territory. The creature dissolved into green motes that rejoined the swirling column rising from the dungeon heart's central pit.

"Watch out!" Ami called from above. Her eyes covered with her visor, she floated between the three arches that formed the reactivated heart's superstructure.

Tiger stepped aside just in time to avoid an overhead blow from a pick that would have pinned her foot to the floor. She spun quickly and kicked the sneaky offender back into the pit.

"Don't kill them!" Ami advised. "New ones will spawn if you do. Eep!" She swerved to the side, narrowly avoiding a thrown pick that would have knocked her computer from her hands.

"Can't be helped! Hurry up and find that bastard rat already!" Tiger demanded as she jumped backwards, avoiding a swipe from the newest imp. A quick moment of concentration, and a stone plate crashed down on the creature. With a pained squeal, it collapsed under the weight, giving Tiger the opportunity to snatch its pick from its grasp. "You just stay there," she ordered as she looked for the other three opponents.

Two remained where Ami had frozen them to the floor, while the third was trying to get around her and retrieve the weapon it had thrown.

With a deft lunge, Tiger threw herself onto the imp. Some wrestling

and rolling around on the floor later, she was sitting down on the little creature's back with a smug expression. "Found your fugitive Keeper yet?"

"Yes, right here," Ami said. Her blue hair rose from behind the partial wall that surrounded the dungeon heart as she stood up. She held up a jar with a perforated lid, within which the black rat pawed furiously at the glass.

"Well, I'm glad that's over," the orange-skinned youma said as she wiped the sweat from her brow. "That little guy sure has the right temper for the job."

Ami nodded wearily. "Let's just quickly get him to the next heart before he figures out how to use Keeper transport."

"Wait, you want to go through this again?"

"Yes, he needs a second dungeon heart so he won't die when I destroy the first one. It's the only way I can observe more closely what happens when a Keeper is banished." Ami clapped her hands. "Perhaps he will even manage to come back, and I can run additional experiments!" she said with a happy smile.

Tiger groaned. "You won't need me for that part, do you? The critter is already magical."

"I will be able to handle the rest on my own," Ami confirmed. The main question was which of the three other hearts she should use. The gold mine under a glacier to the north was out. It was in dwarven territory, and reactivating the heart - or at least its destruction - might alert them to her presence. The same went for the swamp dungeon full of spider webs that looked as if Clairmonte had taken it from another Keeper. If she activated a dungeon heart there, the surfacer army camped out nearby would probably attack at once.

She sighed as she considered the most depressing of her new acquisitions. An expanse of dying forests, burnt fields, and ruined villages that Clairmonte must have been using as recruiting area for his undead troops. Only recently conquered, it was far behind the ill-

defined front line where the newest Keeper forays into surface lands had been stalled by the defenders. Ami had her giant flies patrol the sky to look for any survivors hiding out in the wilds, but she had little hope of finding any. The area would have been ideal for her current experiment, had its dungeon heart not been claimed by a vampire and subsequently destroyed.

That left the dungeon deep underneath the eastern forests. The maps denoted it as elven territory, though she didn't know about any nearby settlements. It would do, especially since the interval between activation and destruction of the dungeon heart would be very brief. "I'll see you back in the dungeon, Tiger," she said before she teleported away with her lab rat.

A dark angel with sunken eyes and corpse-like complexion flew over a landscape composed of angular geometrical shapes arranged in fractal patterns. "Unraveller," the starved-looking creature roared, louder than its sickly body should be capable of, "I am displeased!"

"That is your basic state of existence," the other dark god's emotionless voice replied, seemingly coming from everywhere around. Bluish lightning flickered through crystalline veins lining the jagged structure, pulsing with each word.

"About that so-called solution of yours," the furious voice of Crowned Death specified through his emissary.

"No refunds."

"It doesn't work!"

"I assure you that any problem is entirely your fault. My design is flawless and will do exactly what you specified, given a sufficient concentration of power on this side. I cam hardly be blamed for you being *inadequate*".

"Nobody has that much power, and you knew that from the start!" the dark angel accused. His frightened facial expression didn't match the fury in his words.

"So? I turned the impossible merely impractical. It was quite an interesting problem to pick apart."

"Make something I can use, or I and Azzathra will to destroy you!"

"I advise against that. The working is very delicate and could deteriorate if, for example, you fruitlessly chased me around instead of tending to it."

"What do I care? It's useless!"

"Incorrect. Cooperate with Azzathra. I know it's a novel concept, but combined, you have enough spiritual weight to pass the activation threshold."

Crowned Death thought the suggestion over. "That would be tremendously unpleasant."

"If you wanted to not be uncomfortable, you should have been more specific with your instructions. At least you will be able to bond with your new ally by commiserating about all the times you had to put up with beings smarter than you. I'm sure neither of you will lack for material."

"You really want me to hunt you down, don't you?"

"Of course not. I could not possibly have planned and prepared for that possibility. Though it would be amusing to see you waste your opportunity to strike back at the little Keeper that offended you."

"I loathe you." The dark angel looked panicked for a moment before a strange calm slackened his facial muscles, and he changed course to dive straight down at the patterns below.

"I approve. And I will be around. Observing you. This is turning out to be quite the fascinating experiment."

Ami's fingers moved swiftly and accurately in the light of the narrow spotlight shining onto the workbench before her. Arcs of lightning danced between the digits, discharging regularly into the silver disc

she was working on. Already, the palm-sized object glowed red in the spots she was welding different metals to it.

She shoved her protective goggles up to her forehead as she held up her work and compared it to the schematics pinned to the bulletin board to her right. Her critical stare could discern no great difference between the simple piece of jewellery and the plan, aside from the numerous annotations and formulas covering the blueprint. Ami furrowed her brow slightly at the stylised face of a reaper that stared back at her from the medallion, framed with a simple pattern of iron and coal-coloured gems. *I wish the artwork didn't have to incorporate something like that,* she thought.

Her mood improved quickly when she remembered that it was time to test her creation. "And now..." With bated breath, she inserted a thin rod into the medallion through the edge. A few millimetres more, and- "Gahhhhh!"

In the blink of an eye, she was gone and had reappeared at the other end of her laboratory, her frightened scream still echoing off the walls. Pressing one hand to her racing heart, she waited for her pulse to slow down as she observed the object on her workbench. That tentatively counted as a successful experiment, though further tests were required.

With a clang, the heavy steel door to Ami's laboratory flew open, startling the blue-haired girl.

"Mercury?" Cathy stood in the doorway, peering into the dark chamber. She quickly found Ami, since her red-glowing eyes gave the young Keeper's position away in the darkness. "Are you all right? I heard you scream!"

"I'm fine, thanks." Ami reassured the panting woman. "The outcome of an experiment startled me, nothing to worry about."

"Must have been *some* failure to make you scream like that." The blonde's footsteps seemed loud in the silence as she walked over the catwalks, turning her head rapidly as she peered at the different benches and tables. "Hmm, doesn't look as if anything exploded. Not that I can see much in this gloom. You'd expect all those lights,"

she pointed at the various spotlight cones coming down from the ceiling, "to brighten the place more. So what were you doing?"

"I'was modifying an enchantment to put it to a different use," Ami explained. "Could you please pick up the medallion on the workbench over there? Careful, it's still warm in spots."

"This? Is that what made you scream?" The swordswoman eyed the medallion from a short distance, hands on her hips, before she slowly reached for it. She weighed it in her hand as she inspected it. "Interesting choice for a decoration," she commented, raising an eyebrow.

"But you are not feeling anything odd?" Ami asked.

"You mean aside from some apprehension, which isn't helped by you asking questions like that? No."

"Very good." Ami nodded in satisfaction and reached out with her Keeper powers. "Please hold still for an instant, I need a hair from you."

"Ow! I don't like where this is going," the swordswoman commented. She was too far away to see Ami wrap the hair around a needle-thin metal rod.

"Sorry, I can't tell you exactly what's going on, because I need to gauge your natural reaction," the crimson-eyed teenager explained.

"Great."

Remotely, Ami pulled out the rod she had previously inserted into the medallion. "And now?"

Cathy watched the movement intently. "Still nothing."

"Good." So far, everything seemed to be working as intended. Ami started inserting the rod lined with Cathy's hair. "What about now?"

"No- gyah!" The blonde flung the disc away and leapt backwards several metres. With a loud pinging noise, the object hit the wall at the opposite side of the room. Cathy blinked, her face pale. "What in

the Underworld was *that*?" the blonde shouted, looking at Ami accusingly "And how did I get over here?"

"Hmm, the intensity is still too high," Ami noted. "It's a portable, selective fear trap. I based it on some of those the airship brought back with the Dreadfog Island loot." She walked over to the medallion and tried to pry it loose from the wall it had gotten stuck in.

"You figure you needa new way to scare people?" the blonde asked, keeping well away from the device.

"Yes, exactly," Ami said, smiling. "Let me explain what I intend to do..."

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A Small Deception

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The pale orc took a step back, his eyes darting left and right - from the knives and corkscrews affixed to the walls over to the wooden shelves, where colourful liquids bubbled within skull-emblazoned glass beakers. Reluctantly, his wide-eyed gaze returned to the dominant feature of the chamber. Underneath the highest point of its vaulting ceiling loomed a steel contraption that resembled a high-backed chair with chains hanging off it. Backlit by a basin of glowing coals, it cast long shadows over the pink-skinned creature.

The orc gulped at the sight of two slender girls with identically-shaped faces flanking the worrisome piece of furniture to its left and right. One of them was made of ice, and the other frowned at him with eyes that glowed like the fiery pits of the Underworld. "Empress, I-"

"Silence!" Ami cut him off. "Ulag, was it? You disobeyed a direct order when you attacked Commander Cathy. Be glad that you did not manage to kill or hurt her, or you would be in an even worse position now!"

The pink-skinned underling stooped down even further than natural for his kind, making himself appear smaller. His wide lips curved downwards, revealing a few crooked teeth.

"Until now, I have been too busy with *important* things to deal with you," Ami continued, hoping that she sounded menacing. She had very little experience with intimidating and bullying people, and the hardest part about this performance was pretending that she was enjoying it. "Unfortunately for you, I don't want to encourage the mistaken impression that I tolerate insubordination. Guards!" she called out to the five goblins that stood behind Ulag, blocking the exit.

While she had been speaking to the orc, the short, large-eared creatures in troll-forged breastplates had started grinning. At her

call, they stood at attention.

"Tie the prisoners to the chair," Ami ordered.

The orc started struggling as the greenskins grabbed him and dragged him forward, his unruly, white hair whipping left and right as he jerked. "No, this is all wrong!" he protested, the pitch of his voice rising as he realised that Keeper powers restrained him just as securely as chains would. "I am stronger than her! I should be leading the troops!"

"Strength has little to do with leadership ability," Ami said, milder than she should have. She banished the pity she felt for the frightened creature by reminding herself that he had tried to murder Cathy for personal gain. "Or are you suggesting that I don't know what I'm doing?"

The orc gaped at her, at a loss for words, causing the goblins to giggle.

One of them managed to snap a manacle of the modified dentist chair shut around one of Ulag's wrists. After that initial success, the greenskins had little trouble restraining the orc's other limbs too.

Ami could have simply moved the orc with her Keeper hand at any time. The ice golem, who stood motionless nearby like a glittering nurse, would also have been strong enough to handle the warrior by herself too. In truth, Ami had the goblins assist her only so that they would later gossip about what they had seen. Soon enough, rumours that something horrible had happened to the orc who had defied her will would reach every corner of her dungeon. Still, she didn't want the goblins to know exactly what she had in store for the prisoner, and it was time to shoo them out. "Thank you. You may leave now."

None of them moved toward the doorway. On the contrary, a variety of other curious denizens were congregating around the doorway and peeking in.

"We want watch!" one of the guards declared, rubbing his hands in anticipation.

"Great fun!" a second agreed. Ami couldn't help notice that he was drooling at the corner of his mouth.

A third sat down on the ground "We help! Fetch knives!"

"Or chickens!" the fourth said, poking one finger through the bars of a bird cage that contained a rooster. "Why need chickens?"

Ami blinked. "I may not have been clear enough. Out!" she pointed at the exit.

"But-"

"Unless you want to join him?" she asked sweetly, indicating the sweating orc with her thumb.

"Not that curious!" the first goblin said, shaking his head so fast that his helmet slid down over one eye.

The green creatures muttered in disappointment as they fled, looking back over their shoulders.

"I'll take you up on that offer," a throaty female voice said from outside.

Surprised, Ami looked over at doorway, then blinked at the sight of a woman dressed from head to toe in black leather. Reflexively, she double-checked if this was indeed one of her minions. "Who are you? I didn't request for any dark mistresses to be hired."

"I am Isolda, your Imperial Majesty. I joined as an infiltration specialist instead."

"Infiltration specialist?" Ami asked, eyeing the woman's attention-grabbing outfit. The hood that covered the upper half of her face made it difficult to judge what she would look like without it.

"Well, I managed to get myself hired, didn't I?" the dark mistress said. "Owning more than one set of clothing helps. And I can fight just as well as your other minions, obviously."

"I see." Ami suspected that she should have a talk with Jered about

his hiring practices - or better yet, get Cathy do it. "And now, you want to suffer his-" she pointed at the orc, trying to hide her discomfort "punishment too?"

"Exactly."

"You wouldn't enjoy it, no matter your tastes," the teenager said, feeling queasy.

Isolda laughed. "I'll take that as a challenge."

Ami was about to throw her out when an idea flashed through her mind. Perhaps she could make this work in her favour? Slowly, she nodded. "Very well, if that's what you really want. But don't complain about it later!"

"I won't, your Majesty!" the leather-clad woman said with a lecherous grin.

"So be it." The portcullis leading to the rest of the dungeon slammed shut, sending a weak tremor through the ground and blocking out the speculations of the onlookers outside.

Ami turned her attention to the wards in each of the four corners of the chamber. Upon activation, a soft purple glow spread out from the magical diagrams, creeping across floor tiles and bricks like a new layer of paint. "Shabon Spray!"

"What are you doing, your Majesty?" the dark mistress asked, squinting as the thick, cold mist reduced visibility in the room to about an arm's length.

"I'm ensuring privacy so nobody can spy on me."

"Oh, it's going to be one of *those* sessions," the woman said, licking her lips.

"What?" the orc shrieked, breaking his morose silence.

Ami felt her cheeks heat up. Annoyed at the misunderstanding, she clarified in an icy voice "No. Nothing of the sort. You will understand later." She walked over to the two and touched both with one hand

each.

The orc went limp. At the same time, the statue-like ice golem suddenly moved, catching the dark mistress in her arms as she collapsed.

With two faint spheres of light now floating above Ami's palms, she let out a long breath as she dropped the act and her entire posture relaxed. She put the two specks of life energy into storage and removed two red-hot needles from the burning brazier. While they floated in the air before her, cooling down, she verified that neither of her unconscious "victims" were in danger of choking on their tongue. She took the orc's hand, pricked him in a finger with one of the sterilised needles, and collected a drop of blood. Since Isolda's hands were covered by leather gloves, Ami pricked her in the chin instead. Armed with two red droplets, she approached her workbench and removed a disc-shaped amulet from a drawer.

She split both drops of blood into two and applied one half to the thin rod she pulled out of the piece of jewellery. Then, she glanced over at the spell in the open necromantic tome before her and placed the remaining blood into one bucket each. Reciting an incantation for temporarily counteracting blood loss on the battlefield, she waved her hand over the buckets. Within them, the drops of blood swelled and expanded. Ami only stopped the spell when the red liquid threatened to overflow from its containers. It would fade away eventually, but it would last long enough for her purposes.

Using Keeper transport, she summoned a trio brush-wielding imps and pointed at the coppery-smelling liquid. "You know what to do. Be creative."

As the little minions worked to distribute the blood in disturbing patterns all over the place, she sat down at the desk and pulled out her Mercury Computer. During the two hours she planned to spend in the privacy of this misty chamber, she would continue with her dungeon heart research.

On the screen, the Keeper rat twitched in slow motion within its cage before being lifted by an unseen force and slamming against the bars. The animal remained stuck there for a moment, squeaking and

waving its paws.

Ami leaned forward as the rodent's body suddenly passed through the obstacle and sped down a corridor, moving through several glass panes of variable thickness without shattering them. At that point during the recording, she had teleported to capture the view straight down at the pierced membrane of the rat's recently-destroyed dungeon heart. Ami paused the playback as the animal was just about to be sucked into the black abyss underneath the blood-gushing membrane, and a layer filled with additional data appeared on the screen. She stared at the numbers, frowned, and started jotting down notes.

Camilla knocked on the wooden door with her knuckles. "Abbot Durval? May I have a few minutes of your time?"

"Ambassador? Yes, please come in, the door is open."

The blonde fairy entered and stopped in the doorway, surprised by the bleakness of the chamber. Aside from a low table and a chair that currently carried the weight of the old man, the room lacked furniture or wallpapers. She spotted a number of scars criss-crossing the bare brickwork, and the smell of stone dust filled the air.

"Tea?" Durval asked, nodding at the tankard that stood on the table. Next to it rested a gauntlet studded with black gems whose glint made her hackles rise for some reason.

"No, thank you," Camilla declined, watching the abbot's hands as he finished removing the second gauntlet.

"The Empress gave them to me," Durval answered her unasked question. "She wants me to learn how to properly use them for fine manipulation of black magic."

"What for?" the fairy's gaze moved back to the gouges in the wall. "They feel evil."

"They should. The gemstones are filled to the brim with dark energy," the elderly man explained, tapping the largest of the shiny

round globes with his fingernail. "Apparently, she thinks that if holy power is restructured by dark magic in the right way, then it will be able to cure cursed wounds."

Camilla tilted her head to the side. "I- that sounds like a cover story to trick you into corrupting yourself." After remembering that she was talking to a man about ten times her elder, she added "No offence intended. I mean, using evil power for healing..."

Durval shrugged. "It's really more about destroying the source of the problem. She has shown me some interesting work on using a killing spell to cure diseases."

"What?" Camilla blanched.

"It makes sense in context. In any case, either she seems to believe that her idea will work, or she has managed to fool me." He took a sip of tea. "Now, there was a reason for your visit, Ambassador?"

"Oh, erm, yes." Camilla folded her hands. "I was hoping you could give me some advice. I informed Empress Mercury that my sisters would be arriving here any day now, and she asked me about assisting her with some research, outside of my role as an Ambassador. I don't really want to help her gain more power, but I'm afraid of what she'll do if I deny her request!"

The abbot's white eyebrows rose. "Did she threaten you?"

"Not directly, but," the fairy wrung her hands, "But I asked for some time to think about it, and in the night, the embassy tower was hit by lightning! That was an implied threat!"

"Oh, it was?"

"What else could it be? I mean, the place where my siblings are going to live is struck by lightning while I'm pondering-"

"Sorry, I meant to express that the embassy being struck by lightning is news to me. I have been busy dealing with a few cases of mild food poisoning in the city down here," Durval interrupted. "But I can certainly understand why you are worried under the circumstances."

"So what should I do?" Camilla asked.

"Well, do you know what she wants your help with?"

"Yes, she wants me to activate the underground tower she took from Zarekos a few times so she can see what happens," the blonde explained. She wrung her hands again. "I don't actually know *what* it does, so I can't judge the risks!"

Durval followed the pacing fairy with his eyes. "For the moment, I can only advise you to wait and find out more. If you wish, I will accompany you to your next audience with her and fish for information."

"You'd do that for me?" Camilla's eyes gleamed. "Thank you very much!"

The abbot returned her smile. "Don't mention it. From what I have learned so far, it seems that Mercury lacks much of the viciousness of regular Keepers, so your worries may be unfounded."

Ami was happy that it was time to get out of the chamber. The smell of blood drying on the ground was starting to make her sick. She moved over to the two unconscious figures, careful to step around the pools of clotting liquid. The imps had splashed it around like excited, finger-painting toddlers, but they had also gone a step further and redecorated the wall. Now, murals of faces twisted in agony silently screamed at Ami, and she was glad that her mist hid most of the details. The glimpses she got reminded her far too much of the unfortunate souls trapped within Crowned Death's fiery crown. At least, the new décor was fitting for a blood-splattered torture chamber, which would help maintain the illusion that cruel and unusual punishment had been meted out.

Ami opened the orc's manacles and gently lowered him to the floor before placing the dark mistress on the dentist's chair. For a moment, she worried about Isolda's black bodysuit. Would it be believable for the garment to have survived a torture session intact? Ami shrugged. She didn't feel like stripping the woman, nor like

dealing with the inevitable misinterpretations that would arise if she did. Her underlings would come up with bizarre explanations for the intact clothing on their own, she was sure. After looking around to see if nothing else needed adjusting, she removed her imps from the chamber and verified that she was wearing her properly calibrated fear amulet. "Go ahead."

Her ice golem stepped in between the two motionless bodies, grabbed their shoulders, and started shaking.

"Wake up!" Ami ordered and let some of the stolen life energy flow back into its owners. As soon as the bodies stirred, she cut off the flow.

Ulag regained consciousness first. His eyes opened slowly, as if the lids were heavy as lead, and his pupils shrank to pinprick-size as he got his first look at his surroundings. He sat up with a start, or at least tried to. His upper body lurched and sank back as his muscles failed him in his weakened state.

Above him on the chair, the dark mistress groaned. She moved her head slowly, blinking at the ceiling through the eye-holes in her mask. As she lowered her gaze, it fell on Ami, who was watching her from nearby. Immediately, the entire chair started shaking as its occupant began shivering violently.

Alerted by the noise of chains rattling, the orc turned his head just in time to see the leather-clad woman slide off the seat, almost landing on him. In her eagerness to get away from something, she bumped into him. He followed her gaze, spotted Mercury wearing a blood-stained apron over her short-skirted uniform, and let out a girlish shriek.

Ami kept her face expressionless as both of her victims started dragging themselves away from her across the tiled floor as fast as they could manage. Their wide, terrified eyes that didn't dare stray away from her were proof enough that her amulet was working as intended.

The orc's shoulders bumped into the wall, cutting off his escape route. "W-wh- w- at did y-you-" he began, sabotaged by his

chattering teeth.

"What did I do to you?" Ami asked, smiling evilly. Getting the smile right had taken quite a bit of time in front of the mirror, not to mention a lot of teasing from Cathy and Jered until she managed to combine the frown and the curvature of the lips correctly. "Can't you remember?"

Both he and Isolda shook their heads.

Ami's smile widened. "Good. I could tell you, but that would make me wiping your memories a waste of time. I'd hate for my methods to get out and ruin the surprise. Besides, this way, every time can be as horrible as the first!"

"E-every-" The orc pressing his back against the wall gasped and looked as if he might start crying, and the dark mistress let out a gasp.

Ami turned away from them so they couldn't see her face. She reminded herself that she was doing this so she could avoid having to take more objectionable disciplinary measures. A little deception was positively benign in comparison. "Now get out!"

Stone scraped against stone as the heavy portcullis behind them opened. The gap underneath it was barely wide enough to fit a fist through when Ulag reached it and attempted to squeeze through. Isolda was right next to him, pushing and shoving the best she could manage.

"Look, it's opening!" the gravelly voice of a troll said outside.

"Hah, aren't they in a hurry?" someone else jeered when the heads of the apparent torture victims appeared in the opening and hands clawed at the ground, eliciting gleeful laughter.

"Hey, isn't that a dark mistress? I thought they *liked* pain!" someone called out.

Isolda planted an elbow in the orc's face and pushed past him, leaving a trail of blood on the ground as she dragged herself forward.

The onlookers quieted down for a moment before descending on the woman like vultures. "What she do? Tell us!" "What was the chicken for?" "Did she..."

Within the room that would now undoubtedly become known as her torture chamber, Ami nodded to herself. It certainly looked as if the rumour mill would be working itself into a frenzy over this. Good.

Reacting to her unspoken will, a group of imps filed in with mops and buckets to clean away the evidence of her deception.

"Kunzite, report!" Queen Beryl ordered, her long fingers caressing the black sphere between her hands. "Have you finally tracked down that upstart?"

The transparent projection of the dark general rose from its bow. "We have run into a wall, my Queen," the white-haired man said with a frown.

"I do not want to hear excuses!" the red-haired monarch snapped, not even looking at him.

"It is a literal wall. A barrier impedes our progress. More interference from those who do not want us to reach that world."

Beryl focused on the glowing image in the air before her for the first time. "Can you breach it?"

"It is proving resistant to direct attacks so far," the dark general replied, sounding none too optimistic. "For now, I have sent out my youma to find out how far it extends and where its weak points are."

The dark queen's eyelids lowered halfway, and she sank into the bluish-purple rock of her throne. Within the featureless grey expanse between worlds, space folded in stranger ways than usual, and then she stood next to the dark general.

"My queen?" Surprised, Kunzite turned, his white cape waving with the motion. She rarely left her throne, and only for things she felt strongly about. Failure here, he realised, would have decidedly

unpleasant consequences.

Beryl ignored him and stared at the smooth barrier emitting a golden light, her staff topped by her omni-present crystal ball floating in front of her. The tall woman's long red hair and blue gown fluttered as power swirled around her, manifesting as arcs of lightning around the black orb.

As far as Kunzite could tell, she was not trying to force her way through the obstacle - not that he had expected her to try. One didn't survive to become a powerful sorceress by interacting rashly with unknown energy fields.

After what felt like minutes, the magic died down, and the queen of the Dark Kingdom turned away from the opaque surface. "She is on the other side of this barrier; I am certain," she stated. "Find a way to bypass it. I am getting impatient."

Last edited: Jul 1, 2016

Kept Busy

Originally on 2012-06-22T21:26:00

Ami heard a wooden snap from outside her study, followed by a loud string of obscenities that made her cheeks heat up. With footsteps silenced by the thick carpet, she walked over to the ornate door leading out of the room and pushed the gilded wood open a hand's width. Through the gap, she saw a red-faced dark elf sitting in front of a writing desk, grinding her teeth.

Eline was glaring at the broken pen she held in her ink-splattered fingers. Black dots covered the paper underneath her hands, ruining the rows of neat calligraphy she had been working on. A few droplets had even landed on her green blouse and trousers. With another muttered curse, the dark elf hurled the splintered half of the pen at the wall, hitting one of the rectangular pillars and leaving a black spot on its snowflake-shaped engravings.

"What happened?" Ami asked as she approached to see what the problem was.

Eline flinched, and her mouth closed with an audible click. She turned and looked over her shoulder at the approaching teenager, her fingers crumpling up the stained letter to the dwarfs. "E-Empress! Forgive me, I did not intend to disturb you! The pen- it just broke, and..." She shrugged.

Ami inspected the damage. It didn't look as if the splinters had pierced the dark elf's delicate white skin. "The pen just broke?"

"Y-yes! I didn't do anything wrong!" Eline declared, squirming in her seat. "I wasn't even putting much pressure on it. I couldn't have, since I wouldn't have been able to write properly that way."

Ami briefly glanced at the neat, flowing characters that had earned Eline her current position as a scribe. "So the pen was faulty?" The half of the writing implement that was rolling across the polished floor disappeared, only to reappear on top of her palm. Upon closer

inspection, she smelled rotten wood. Strange, her dungeon heart had created the utensil along with the room. Perhaps the ink's had reacted poorly with the wooden shell? Snapping out of her thoughts, she focused on the worried dark elf. "It seems you are right," she agreed, and Eline's posture relaxed slightly. "I apologise for the inconvenience."

The woman's eyes widened slightly. "N-no need to apologise to me, your Majesty," she said with a deep bow. "I shall start over at once." She hesitated upon seeing the state of the drafts, which had been sprinkled with ink too. "After cleaning my hands and obtaining a new, legible version of the draft from Lord Jered, if that is alright with you?"

Ami nodded, somewhat bemused by Eline treating the adventurer like a noble. It made sense, in a way, since he occupied a high position in her court - as strange as it felt for her to have a court in the first place. She should really get around to formalising everything and bestowing a real title upon him one of these days, but there were just so many more pressing issues. Besides, she had the vague notion that she should have a proper coronation ceremony before she started handing out titles. Perhaps after the negotiations with the dwarfs were successful?

While Ami pondered, Eline reached the antechamber's exit and almost bumped into Torian at the door.

"Empress! Do you have a moment?" the short-bearded warlock said with a winning smile, leaning aside to let the dark elf pass.

Ami blinked at the huge mushroom hat that grew from the top of his staff and which he held over his head like an umbrella. "What is that?" she asked, pointing at the white-dotted red fungus.

"Lab accident," Torian commented as he opened both wings of the door so he could step inside with his cumbersome burden. "A potion shelf broke and spilled its contents. Irritating, but we'll fix it later." He waved one hand dismissively. "I'm here to inform you that the death god's aquatic troops have stopped advancing. Perhaps he has finally calmed down enough to realise that an attack would be futile?"

"Or he is waiting for reinforcements," Ami pondered. She had learned to be pessimistic about anything that involved the dark gods.

"That is also a possibility," Torian agreed. "I am certainly not suggesting that we become less vigilant. Now," he adjusted the tiny golden chain holding shut his high collar with his free hand, "I couldn't help notice that... well... may I speak freely?"

Ami nodded.

"Why did you waste a dungeon heart on a rat?" the black-haired man blurted out. "I mean, I can see the advantages of a subordinate who literally can't think on his own, but wouldn't someone smart and loyal have been a better choice for the job? Someone like me?" The warlock patted his chest. "Your Majesty, I beg you! Please consider giving one of the conquered dungeon hearts to me!"

"But-"

"Have I not served you well? I would make a great subordinate Keeper!"

"That isn't-"

"What could a ruddy rat possibly be more qualified for than me?" the warlock spat out in frustration.

"Dying," Ami stated flatly, causing the man to stiffen. "I am researching the effects of destroying dungeon hearts on the Keeper. The test subjects are not expected to survive."

Torian gulped, the enthusiasm wiped from his face. "I... see. So you are just going to destroy all of the seized hearts? Can you afford that? It feels unbelievably wasteful." He shook his head slowly.

"None of them are safe to use while the dark gods are angry at you," Ami informed him.

"Oh." Torian showed his disappointment by hanging his head. "Well, if you are ever in need of a subordinate-"

There was a knock at the door. "Your Majesty?" a trollish voice

called. "The Ambassador wants to see you urgently!"

"Hurry!" a fairy's voice echoed through the corridor, accompanied by the sound of many rapid but soft footsteps.

"I can't lead you any faster, Dandel! Mercury's guiding gem doesn't work instantly!" Camilla protested. The short blonde hovered in front of an intersection, holding out a round amulet to see if it would change temperature to discourage her from proceeding. She was the only of the sisters to fly in the air, despite the high ceilings. "No traps," she concluded after a moment and pointed at the right hallway.

Her sisters started running in the indicated direction, their rain-drenched wings hanging limply from the back openings in their equally wet swimsuit-like uniforms.

"Are you sure we can't go meet abbot Durval first?" Camilla asked as she flew after them. She hadn't expected their reunion to turn out quite that stressful.

"Do you want to lead a reaper to the town full of civilians?" Tilia asked rhetorically.

"No!" Some glitter trickled off Camilla's wings as she shook her head. "Why is he chasing you, anyway?"

"It's a reaper! It doesn't need a reason to kill!" Roselle huffed. Her orange eyes widened when an imp stepped out of an alcove in front of her and froze in surprise. With a grunt of effort, she vaulted over the startled creature.

"The stupid thing spotted us when we were flying along the coast," Anise explained as she ran. "He's been following us ever since!"

"That slowing spell is such a pain! I almost dropped off the carpet when he first used it!" Tilia added.

"I still can't believe he's fast enough to almost keep up with a flying carpet!" Melissa said plaintively.

"He is clearly speeding himself up with magic," Cerasse commented. "Also, this means we should move faster."

"Do you think he can track us in this labyrinth?" Dandel asked and peered down a side passage as she rushed past. Inside, a few orcs turned their heads to stare after her.

"He only needs to follow the wet footprints," the violet-haired fairy answered.

"Great. Not only does the empress' stupid weather make us miserable and cold, it also makes us easier to track," Anise grumbled.

Camilla, for her part, found the temperature rather pleasant and even a bit on the hot side, but her ambassadorial dress was still dry. "We need to go right at the next intersection. Watch out, the floor is rather smooth here!"

"Got it!" Melissa shouted. The blue-haired sister was currently in the lead, and instead of slowing down, she kept close to the wall. Her right arm lashed out, latching on to the square column that decorated the corner. Carried by her momentum, she pivoted around the bend in a graceful arc up until the stone gave with a loud crack. The fairy suddenly found herself holding a small chunk of masonry and hurtling towards the far wall.

"Melissa!" Camilla shouted when her sister crashed shoulder-first into the hard surface and slid to the ground. Pieces of broken murals landed around and on top of her.

"Anise, Cerasse, help her up," Dandel told the two fairies closest to Melissa. She creased her forehead as a distant roar reached her. "He's getting closer! We need to get to the Empress quickly!"

"Are you all right?" Cerasse asked as she bent over the prone girl.

"Ow, that's going to leave a bruise," Melissa answered with a dazed expression. "The ground is nice and warm, though."

"Stop lying around and get up!" Anise said as she grabbed one of Melissa's arms and yanked her to her feet. The redhead kicked one

of the pieces of debris and frowned at the cracks spreading outward from the destroyed mural. "What kind of crappy architecture crumbles that easily, anyway?"

Tilia put a hand on Anise's back and pushed gently. "Keep moving! Those trolls up there don't look too happy about the damage!" She pointed at a balcony from which a handful of green faces were glowering down at them.

"Official Ambassadorial business! We need to see the Empress right now!" Camilla shouted in their direction as the group of fairies ran past.

The most muscular of the large-nosed creatures narrowed his eyes at her retreating back and disappeared through a doorway.

"Which way now?" Anise shouted as the group arrived at another intersection. She let go of Melissa's arm and looked over her shoulder. "I think I hear the stomping of hooves!"

There was a blue flash, and a blast of cold air filled with snowflakes momentarily displaced the dungeon's heat.

Startled, Camilla's head whipped right to look at the blue-haired figure now barring their way. She heard a soft gasp from her side as her sisters reflexively dropped into battle stances.

"Ambassador?" Mercury spoke, letting her gaze wander over the six wary fairies before focusing it on the blonde. "You wanted to speak to me?"

"Your horned reaper is hunting my sisters here, you have to stop him!" she blurted out. "Your Majesty," she remembered to add after a moment.

"Rabixtrel?" the dark empress sounded surprised and covered her mouth with one hand. "Now where- oh!" She gestured, space to her right twisted, and Camilla suddenly found herself staring at the red-scaled back of the reaper.

The demon's hooves hit the ground with thunderous noise and struck sparks as he skidded onwards for a short distance while he

turned to face the fairies. He lunged forward, scythe raised, and came to a sudden stop.

Camilla gulped. She could see the monster's muscles strain as it tried to push through some invisible force until its solid white eyes spotted his Keeper.

"Rabixtrel, they are guests. You aren't allowed to kill them. Limit yourself to the undead until I give you different orders, please," the blue-haired empress spoke.

The horned demon snorted, blowing steam from his nose slits, and glared at the winged girls. "Fine," he growled out through finger-long teeth, his scaled fingers shifting their grip on his scythe.

"Good," Mercury nodded. "Now, please continue exterminating the ghosts." An instant later, the red monster was gone.

"He didn't sound as if he meant it, if you ask me," Roselle muttered quietly.

Mercury still heard her. "I transported him half a continent away. You are safe from him." She briefly met the eyes of each of the fairy girls and inclined her head lightly."Welcome to my realm, by the way."

Dandel straightened and bowed with military precision. A quick sideways glare prompted her sisters to do the same. "Empress Mercury. We are honoured that you would welcome us personally. Thank you for restraining your minion."

"Please get up, there's no need for that. I'm just glad this was a problem that could be resolved easily." The empress smiled. "I suppose you would prefer to return to the guest quarters now and recover from your journey?" she continued, alluding to the drenched state of six of the fairy sisters.

"That is an excellent suggestion, your Imperial Majesty," Dandel replied, recognising the dismissal for what it was.

"Wait, the same guest quarters that have a hole in the roof large enough to fly a flying carpet through?" Anise piped up.

The two red glows in Mercury's shadowed face winked out briefly as she blinked. "There... is a hole in the embassy roof? What made it?" She looked at Camilla as if she thought the Ambassador had something to do with it.

"Lightning! It got hit by Lightning!" the blonde explained quickly. "Didn't you know?"

"Lightning..." The empress lowered her head, resting her chin on one hand. "But I don't allow lightning to- excuse me, I have to go check something!" She disappeared, but reappeared for a moment to add "Oh, and don't worry about the roof, I'll send some imps to fix it."

Ami felt a tug at the hem of her skirt and looked down.

From underneath a yellow hard helmet, the fist-sized black eyes of an imp stared back at her.

"Yes?" she asked, wondering what the little worker wanted.

The imp waved her fingers toward herself several times and then jumped into the air, pulling her knees up to her chest. In the middle of her somersault, she shrunk into a tiny green sphere and disappeared, leaving nothing but a swarm of dissipating green motes behind.

Ami blinked. *She wants me to follow?* With a thought, she retrieved the new position of the underling from her dungeon heart and pulled herself through space. With a metallic clang, her boots touched down on a high walkway suspended between rows of barrel-like contraptions. Underneath the ceiling, a thicket of interwoven glass pipes, crystals, and pendulums formed a deliberately confusing canopy. Ami stepped around one of the cold pillars of fog cascading down from a bowl of dry ice above and faced the three imps standing around a tiny cart. "Well?"

The imps squeaked and hissed unhappily as they opened the cart's lid so Ami could see the glittering pile of raw artificial gems inside.

She spotted the problem at first glance, and got a little fright. The heap of blue gems was smaller than it should be. At a rough estimation, about a third of the expected harvest was missing. Was someone stealing from her?

One of the imps let out a squeal and beckoned her to follow. The creature scurried down a ramp and led her to the base of a gem furnace, then disappeared into the real access hatch at the bottom of the structure.

Ami brushed aside the cables and panels inscribed with useless occult symbols and examined the mechanism hidden behind the distractions. With her hand, she brushed over one of its metallic surfaces and frowned at the reddish-brown residue that stuck to her fingertips. "Rust?"

The iron door slammed shut behind Mukrezar with enough force to shake dust off its frame. His footsteps echoed loudly off the damp, cold stone walls as he stomped across the torch-lit chamber.

"Bad news, your Frownyness?" the cheerful voice of his butler came from behind him as the imp moved his legs rapidly in order to catch up.

The pink-haired elf stopped and waited for the suit-wearing creature to reach his side. His face twisted into a grimace of rage, and he kicked the imp hard enough to send him flying.

The butler bounced off the far wall and landed face-first on the floor.

"No, I always look like this when I'm happy, imbecile!"

"As you say, Master," the imp groaned. A few seconds later, he jumped up as if nothing had happened and brushed the dirt off his black suit.

Mukrezar took a deep breath. "That spineless worm of a high priest is denying me the troops I want!"

"How abominably prudent of him." The imp stroked his beard,

keeping well away from the pacing Keeper. "Why?"

"Something about Crowned Death weakening the enemy so much that -I quote - you'd have to try to fail to mess it up," Mukrezar muttered, waving his hand dismissively. "His success rate so far doesn't exactly fill me with confidence."

"But Master, who cares about a few failures here and there? Just look at your own-"

"Quiet! I am thinking," the crimson-eyed elf interrupted. "This pointless distraction is taking up valuable time I could instead be using to figure out where the Avatar's new mantle is being created."

"That disgusting champion of all that is nice and good," the imp shuddered, "will soon have collected a force able to challenge you here, Master."

"I am aware of that. I might have to move at that point. Now, how do I get out of- ah!" He slammed a fist into his open palm. "I got a solution!"

"Does it involve rings, your Nefariousness?" the butler asked, his expression blank.

"Not this time, unfortunately. Well, it might. Purely for the amusement value. Hmm, if I married them off and told them..."

"Master! You were about to tell me about an actually *useful* idea!" the butler interrupted as Mukrezar's gaze became unfocused.

"Right. It's simple, really. How's dear old Groll doing these days?"

"Your admirably treacherous and selfish former subordinate remains in the torture chamber. We put him into an iron maiden built from his own teeth," the butler proclaimed, rubbing his hands with glee. "I hope you don't need to ask him anything, Master. His pronunciation has deteriorated quite a bit since we put ants in his mouth."

"That doesn't even begin to cover what he deserves for abandoning me. Unfortunately, I see myself forced to release him from his suffering."

"Master?" The butler sounded appalled and looked up at Mukrezar, his big black eyes wide.

"Well, it would be completely pointless of me to send troops against Mercury only to be banished in mid-assault because Groll escaped under mysterious circumstances and took the opportunity to attack my semi-abandoned dungeon." Mukrezar chuckled. "I'm afraid we'll be under siege here until whatever Crowned Death is trying finishes blowing up in his face."

"I see. Who are you going to promote to Groll's role? Perhaps a warlock with a heart as black as pitch, or a mistress with no heart at all?" the butler suggested. "Or a bloodthirsty vampire?"

"I was thinking about a goblin," the elf said in a deadpan voice.

"A goblin Keeper." The butler half-closed his eyes and scratched his chin. "That was a terrible joke, your Humourlessness."

"I am completely serious!" Mukrezar replied with a grin.

The bearded imp groaned. "That's what I was afraid of, Master. Oh well. Far be it from me to stop you from wasting your time leading a complete moron by the hand."

Mukrezar raised his index finger and waggled it left and right. "Actually, it's not *me* who is going to keep an eye on him." His crimson gaze bored into the butler, his grin unwavering.

The butler's shoulders slumped.

Ami appeared on the mat-covered floor of one of the smaller training rooms. A dripping noise made her look over to the shooting range, where the targets were coated in melting ice. She returned her gaze to the tall woman sitting on one of the mats and dipping her hands into a pot filled with warm water. "Cathy? You wanted to see me?"

The swordswoman looked up, the right half of her face reddened and covered in tiny welts around her scar. "Hello, Mercury." She rose, brushing off the thick blanket she was wearing over her Sailor

Mercury uniform. " Yes, I- whoa, you look about as exhausted as I feel!"

Ami sighed, letting her weariness show. "I've been spending the last few hours replacing the anti-spying measures for the gem furnaces and doing various other repairs," the blue-haired girl said, her shoulders slumping. "And when I was done with that, a water pipe burst in the civilian town, and I had to deal with that too. This sudden string of problems is unlikely and alarming." She politely tried not to stare too much at the scratch marks on the blonde's cheek.

"Come to think of it, I heard some minions grumble about mildew and the food," Cathy commented. "Anyway, I got the freezing spell more or less figured out right now. At the very least, I'm no longer freezing my own fingers, so that's progress. Do your thing and I'll show you." She took a balanced stance and spread her arms.

Ami nodded and turned into a streak of black lightning that shot toward the blonde, hit the ribbon decorating her chest, and sunk into her body. When Cathy's eyes opened, they glowed red from within.

"Maybe you can do something about this infernal rash while you are at it," the true owner of the body said mentally as Ami possessed her.

Ami stopped her - Cathy's - hand about half-way up to her face, fingers ready to scratch the distracting itch on her cheek. *"It is rather distracting. Do you know where you got it?"*

"It woke me up this morning," Cathy replied, radiating dissatisfaction and irritated confusion. *"I have no idea where it comes from."*

Ami concentrated on forming a necromantic healing spell and brushed over the rash with three fingers, restoring the inflamed skin to its proper state. It was only a fix for the symptoms, but she couldn't do more without knowing the deeper cause.

Cathy appreciated the relief from the itching. *"Ah, much better! All right, pay attention now!"*

Ami didn't resist when the swordswoman brushed her control aside

and took moved the body. The teenager observed quietly how the blonde started to shape the borrowed magic.

Cathy crossed her arms in front of her chest. *"Now, I get the feeling that your Shabon Spray Freezing isn't quite the right way to do this, but if you focus the flow like this, you can-*

The electric light overhead flickered once and then went out, leaving the possessed ersatz-senshi standing in a pitch-black room.

Cathy blinked in surprise, not that it changed anything about the darkness. *"All right, something is seriously wrong with this dungeon."*

Sitting in a small circle of candlelight, Ami frowned at the screen of her palmtop computer and tried to figure out what was happening. Her fingers stopped typing when the crystal ball standing on the stack of books to her right activated and showed her an unwelcome face.

Princess Julia's features twisted into a cheerful smile. "Hello, Empress! Are you still looking for a solution to everything around you falling apart?" Midori opened the conversation.

The other Keeper's words intrigued and worried and Ami enough to prevent her from ending the conversation at once. Her heart sped up. If Midori had noticed her current troubles, then others might have too. "Greetings, Midori. Mentioning a solution implies that you know what's going on?" she asked guardedly.

"Oh, absolutely. It always pays to be informed." The possessed elf paused for dramatic effect and leaned closer to the crystal ball. She raised a well-manicured hand, as if to shield her mouth from the view of invisible observers and whispered. "Would you like to know more?"

Of course I want to know more! Ami thought, though she would take everything she learned from a Keeper with a grain of salt. "What would that information cost me?" she asked instead of jumping at

the offer.

"Oh, this one's free!" Midori said. "It's not as if you can do anything about it."

Ami found the way the other Keeper was giggling outright disturbing. Such a good mood didn't bode well for her.

"Anyway, it's rather simple. Crowned Death is sitting like a big fat chunk of toxic sewage in the flow of corruption that eventually wells up from your dungeon hearts. In other words, your corruption hates you and wants you dead. Sucks to be you!"

Ami's eyes widened. Her dungeon no longer being safe from its own corruption *would* theoretically account for the observed effects. She massaged her temples. What could she do to prevent this? For the moment, she drew a blank. "Could you *please* stop giggling?" she snapped at Midori.

"Aw, is that any way to talk to someone who can save you? Unlike you, I do have allies in the realm of the Dark Gods who can do something about this. It will cost you, of course."

"Of course." Ami knew that she shouldn't be getting her hopes up. There was no way to ensure that Midori would keep his part of any potential bargain. Well, she could at least listen to what the other Keeper wanted. Knowing what he desired could turn out to be useful, even if she declined to meet the price. "I assume the title you wanted is part of the cost?"

"Oh, no." Midori waved one hand like a fan. "Why would I go for something like that when I'm holding all the cards? No. Instead, you'll abdicate in my favour!"

Ami recoiled. "What? Out of the question!" she replied reflexively to the outrageous demand.

"Is that so?" Midori grinned, showing many pearly white teeth that did not belong to him. "Tell me, have you checked your dungeon hearts lately?"

Last edited: Jul 1, 2016

Creeping Degeneration

Originally on 2012-07-05T19:21:00

Deep within Ami's dungeon, inside a steel vault that darkened and brightened with each pulse of the dungeon heart, she stood on the artefact's dais and stared wide-eyed up at the glowing sphere.

It dimmed, and the echoing rumble of a heartbeat drowned out the soft whimper that escaped from her lips.

When the orb's returning glow washed over her pale face, she was creasing her brow in deep worry and dread at the sight of greyish, veined patches marring the smooth surface of her life-support equipment.

The heartbeat of the dungeon heart picked up in response to her own, and she fought to retain her calm as she analysed what she was seeing. The fungus-like rot penetrated the clear crystal with root-like tendrils, but didn't go any deeper than the width of a fingernail. On the positive side, the dungeon heart was fighting the contamination, slowly pushing infected material out to the surface, where it flaked off. This was the same mechanism it used to mitigate other damage, Ami pondered. It filled up the gashes and abrasions with material from elsewhere, shrinking in the process.

Her gaze moved downward to the layer of greyish-black dust that formed a disc underneath the orb and coated the three golden troll statues that carried the huge crystal on their backs. With her boot, she scratched a thin line into the dirt to evaluate its thickness. How long had this been going on, and how fast was her dungeon heart shrinking? With shaking fingers, she opened the Mercury computer and began calculating the time the dungeon heart could survive under these conditions.

The number she saw reassured her somewhat. She had forty-three days to figure out a way to prevent the artefact's destruction. That wasn't a lot of time, considering the complexity of the problem and the distracting side effects it caused, but -

The numbers on her screen changed to red as her sensors noticed a discrepancy between the projected volume of the sphere and its observed dimensions. With a sinking feeling in her stomach, Ami watched the remaining time correct itself downwards as the device accounted for a constantly increasing decay rate. She gulped as the countdown finally stabilised on two days, three hours, and fifteen seconds. Only two more days until the dungeon heart would collapse and suck her into the realm of the dark gods.

Ami felt the sudden urge to curl up into a shivering ball. Azzathra had been bad enough, and he had merely been mildly irritated with her. Crowned Death hated her like none other. She now understood completely why Midori was confident that she would accept his deal. From his point of view, she had the choice between giving up her title and between death and eternal torture. Unfortunately, nothing came immediately to mind that would prove him wrong. With weak knees, she got up from the floor - she hadn't even realised that she had sat down. She had no time for despair if she wanted to find a solution. First order of business: check how her two other dungeon hearts were doing.

A flash of blue light later, and Ami felt as if she had teleported into a freezer. The air within the hall housing her Arctic dungeon heart felt frigid, but the condition of the artefact itself was identical to that in her home base. At a quick glance, none of the storage rooms seemed to have taken significant damage yet, though she would have to throw out the frozen food. She wasn't confident about the state of the traps, which had a lot more complex parts that could go bad. Unfortunately, she couldn't afford the time it would take to check and fix everything.

With a wave of her arm, three imps wearing blue coveralls formed before her. "Keep things from falling apart down here," she instructed the workers, who immediately darted off in separate directions. A quick teleport transported her to the experimental dungeon on the central eastern part of the Avatar Islands.

When her feet touched down on the cobblestone-like floor, she winced. Her Keeper sight had prepared her for the droplets of blood that dripped down from the red-glowing orb of her dungeon heart, but it hadn't warned her about the smell. The sickly-sweet stench of

carrion assaulted her nose and made her bile rise. Ignoring the discomfort, Ami stepped closer to the four inclined pillars that rose from the ground around the artefact and merged into a pyramid above it. She didn't let the fact that they seemed to have partly turned into skeletal snakes deter her.

Her gaze rose to the ceiling. The short, pointy stalactites over her head were somewhat more worrisome, especially since she was sure they hadn't been there when she arrived. She watched them for a few seconds, but they didn't budge. Nevertheless, she moved a few steps to the side and kept throwing nervous glances around herself as she started to take readings.

The dungeon heart beat in a steady rhythm while Ami waited for the results, dribbling more blood-coloured liquid down on the corpse-like statues that held it aloft. While the substance looked more dramatic than the mouldy patches affecting her other dungeon hearts, she thought there was less of it total. A moment later, her computer confirmed that initial impression. According to the data, this type of dungeon heart would last four times longer than the others. She shouldn't have been surprised, given that she had designed it for increased ability to manipulate how corruption effects manifested. Good news, but this would have helped her a lot more if she was able to safely shut down the other two dungeon hearts, she thought, biting her lips. As it stood, once the first of them crumbled... she had to find a solution, fast!

In the flickering torchlight, the bookshelves lining the walls of the meeting chamber seemed higher than normal, their tops melding with the darkness underneath the ceiling. Shadows hid the eyes of the people assembled around the round table.

"Mercury? What's up? Did you turn into a dark elf when we weren't looking?" Jered joked, but didn't manage to coax a smile from the unnaturally pale girl.

"Stupid emergencies interrupting my bath," Cathy sighed while towelling off her hair, dislodging a few glittering droplets that rained down on bare skin. One of them turned into a wisp of steam when it

touched her metal brassiere and encountered a fading tendril of flame left from summoning the reaper outfit.

To the swordswoman's left, Tiger let herself drop into the free seat, only to freeze when a chair leg groaned and started wobbling under her weight.

Snyder caught Jadeite's attention by brushing his elbow against the other man's arm. He met the dark general's eyes and jerked his head to the right, indicating Ami's clenched fists resting on the polished wood. When the dark general raised a questioning eyebrow, the acolyte grabbed one of his own hands with the other and gave an encouraging nod.

A warm touch pressing gently down on her left hand startled Ami from her frantic thoughts. She glanced over and spotted a white-gloved hand resting on her own. Her gaze met Jadeite's steel-blue eyes and noted the ghost of an uncertain smile around his lips. Her spirit lifted by the gesture, she unclenched her fists with a conscious effort and leaned against the leather-cushioned back of her chair. "The situation... it's really bad," she began. "Crowned Death is attacking me from the realm of the dark gods, by turning the dungeon's corruption against it," she summarised. "That's the cause of the recent accidents and health problems."

Cathy frowned and brushed with her fingertips over her cheek where her rash had been earlier.

"And it's going to get worse, fast," Ami elaborated. "The hostile corruption builds up over time if we don't find a way to stop it!" She gulped, her mouth dry. "Also, my dungeon hearts can't take the damage and will crumble in a few days if we can't find a solution," she added in a small voice and hung her head. "Ideas?"

"How much time do we have?" Cathy asked, her eyes narrowed.

"About two days," Ami stated, drawing a soft gasp from her audience. Jadeite's grip on her hand tightened for a moment. "I think I can buy some more time with the limited control the dungeon hearts have over the corruption, by perhaps a day or two."

"So," Tiger hit the table with the flat of her palm, "we have only four days to find a way to kick Crowned Death's arse and stop him from doing this?"

"Better plan for three," Ami corrected her, shuddering as she remembered the previous time she had challenged the dark god and been helpless before his power. She slowly shook her head. "Most of my magic doesn't even work in his realm, and I have no way to attack him from this one."

"Not even by sending something back through the dungeon heart?" Cathy suggested. "You got rid of his Incarnation that way."

"Or flush something nasty down in a dark temple," Tiger suggested. "He thinks he's getting a sacrifice, but instead he gets blown up!"

"I'm not able to aim anything like that. At all." Ami objected. "I don't even have a way to observe the other side." Besides, anything strong enough to affect the death god was likely to obliterate whatever she was using to send it before it got through.

"Well, that's lame," Tiger commented. She crossed her arms and pouted. "All right, the satisfying option is not possible. What else can we do?"

"Midori claimed that he had allies in the realm of the dark gods who could put a stop to this," Jered said and looked at Ami. "Could we hire dark angels?"

A memory of three black-winged beings diving into the basin of Clairmonte's crumbling dark temple flashed through the teenager's mind. Agents who could operate on the other side would be useful, even in case they couldn't do more than collect information about the enemy for her. *"Torian!"*

In the space before the wall screen used for presentations, a short-haired warlock. Transported in mid-step, he swayed for a moment as he recovered his balance. His eyebrows shot upwards as he spotted the people assembled around the table, and he bowed in the young empress' direction. "Your Majesty? You called for me?"

"Torian! How would one go about recruiting dark angels?" Ami got straight to the point.

"Dark angels?" Torian smiled and steepled his fingers. "That is not particularly difficult, since they are quite mercenary. Offer them sufficient sacrifices at an appropriately large temple and they will appear. With the number of townsfolk in your care, even the upkeep in souls will not-"

"Thank you," Ami interrupted him, closing her eyes in disgust. "That is all."

"If I may ask-"

"Later." Ami sent the magician back to the laboratory she had snatched him from.

"No dark angels," Snyder said. It wasn't a question.

"No dark angels," Ami confirmed. That price was not one she was willing to pay.

"Unless we managed to abduct and brainwash one, perhaps," Tiger quipped.

"I don't think we'll have the time," Cathy said, folding up her towel. "Not to mention everything else that's wrong with that plan." She looked the tiger-striped woman sitting to her left up and down. "Say, are you youma demonic enough to work the same way?"

"Do I look like a native of the dark god's realm who has taken on a physical shape to you?" Tiger asked back.

"Yes. No. Maybe?" The blonde rubbed the back of her head. "You've got horns."

"So do cows!" Tiger crossed her arms.

"Youma are denizens of the physical realm," Jadeite cleared up the issue. He let go of Ami's hand and looked her straight in the eyes. "Queen Metallia could help you. The best way to fight a god is with another god."

"I- I can't do that," Ami said. "If I woke her, I'd be betraying everyone and dooming both worlds."

"It's not a question of whether the Great Ruler will wake up, but of when," Jadeite insisted. "Having her favour is the only way to protect yourself and your allies when that happens."

Why did he have to make the abhorrent option sound so reasonable? After challenging Crowned Death with the undead control spell, Ami knew exactly just how outmatched she was against a dark god. In a direct confrontation, she didn't stand a chance, not even with the aid of the other senshi. And Metallia was supposed to be even stronger than the death god.

Would it really be so wrong if she saved herself, and in the process those she cared about too, rather than nobody at all? The faces of her friends and her mother appeared in her mind's eye, looking at her in disappointment. Ami's fingernails dug into her palms, and she felt ashamed for her thoughts. She couldn't do that. It was her duty as a sailor senshi to protect everyone! Metallia's awakening might be inevitable, but she wouldn't speed up the process!Even if she was terrified of what was going to happen to her. "There has to be a better way," she broke her silence, startling herself with how weak her voice sounded.

Cathy shifted slightly in her seat and breathed out, and the muscles around Jered's mouth relaxed.

Before Jadeite could say anything else, Snyder interrupted "You can ask the Light for help. That has to be a better option than bringing more dark gods into this."

"And end up sealed away," the dark general commented, frowning at the redhead.

When compared to eternal torture, imprisonment didn't sound as bad as it should to Ami any more. "I'll have to talk to the Avatar." Perhaps in the meantime, the Light gods had been able to glean something that could help her from her notes? Feeling a bit of hope, she faced Jered.

The green-clad man stood up. "I'll try to contact him. This is all out of my area of expertise anyway."

"Thank you. Now-"

With a splintering noise, the doorknob came off under Jered's grip. "Argh. This is getting annoying."

Ami was about to open the door for him, but it swung open moments after he fiddled with its lock.

He paused briefly in the doorway. "I'll let you know as soon as I have managed to get the Avatar on the crystal ball in person."

As his footsteps faded away, Ami stared at the almost blank sheet listing possible solutions before her. "What about Midori's offer? I never wanted to be an empress in the first place..."

"You would look terribly weak, for one thing," Tiger said immediately.

"Besides, can you trust him to keep up his side of the deal?" Cathy asked.

"Perhaps the terms of the transfer of titles could be set in such a way that it is only valid once certain conditions have been met. We might need a lawyer." Jadeite sounded faintly amused by the notion.

"Ah, actually, I think this course of action might have some significant drawbacks," Snyder spoke up. "You see, I have been wondering why exactly Midori would want a valid noble title. Granting him ruler-ship of some wasteland here on the Avatar Islands does not sound very useful, at first glance."

Ami had been wondering about that herself. She couldn't lawfully grant titles anywhere else, so what was the point? "Go on," she encouraged the acolyte.

"So, in order to satisfy my curiosity, I discussed the issue with Abbot Durval," Snyder continued. "He isn't entirely certain, since he is no expert on the topic, but he theorises that the fallen princess serving Midori might technically have a claim to the elven throne. If she accepted him as her sovereign while he already had a legitimate

title, then their realm would be part of his - and you know how a dungeon heart reacts in that case."

By grabbing all the area it could get. Ami covered her mouth as she realised what would happen. "The elves wouldn't stand a chance against him!"

Snyder nodded.

"Jered, please find out exactly what exactly princess Julia's position is in the line of elven succession once you are done with your current task," Ami mentally requested of the brown-haired man.

"Sure," his mildly distorted voice responded in her thoughts.

"So I can't accept Midori's help either." Ami hung her head.

"Unless you wipe him off the map once you have what you want!" Tiger underlined her suggestion with a swiping gesture that sent the blank notes in front of her flying.

"Or simply kidnap the princess," Jadeite elaborated on the idea.

Surprised, Ami blurted out the first thing that came to her mind. "That's rather dishonest."

"Eh, I'm sure Midori deserves it," Cathy said, shrugging her shoulders. "I'm more concerned about making yet another enemy when we are already in a precarious position, militarily speaking. With the current state of the power grid," she pointed at the torches illuminating the place, "the reaperbot controls are rather unreliable."

Ami nodded. The corruption wasn't only threatening her life directly. With the near-endless amount of complications it could cause, the dungeon was no longer a safe place. Her responsibility for the health and safety of the thousands of civilians within the underground complex weighted heavily on her mind. "Our food supply is compromised too," Ami noted. "The farms depend on a steady power supply."

"Just wonderful." The swordswoman put her elbows on the table and rested her head on her hands. "Any other good news I should know

about? Please tell me the dungeon is still structurally sound."

Ami pulled an update on the state of her tunnels from the dungeon heart. "Err, aside from a minor ceiling collapse in one of the less frequented outer corridors, nothing-"

Cathy groaned and punched the innocent table. "Great, so we also have to worry about the place caving in on us!"

Ami could understand the blonde's frustration with the situation very well. "Most of the dungeon won't do that for a while yet," she hurriedly reassured her.

"Most," Cathy repeated, glaring at the ceiling as if she expected it to rain down on her any moment now.

"In any case, those are problems we can address," Ami said, straightening. She took a moment to meet the eyes of everyone around the table. "Here is what we are going to do about this..."

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Abandon Ship, Part 1

Originally on 2012-08-04T01:36:00

In the small cavern, heat radiated from the rocky ground and from the man-sized pipe piercing both floor and ceiling. Despite the furnace-like conditions, three figures worked within the chamber.

Cord-like muscles rippled under green skin, and the head of a hammer hit a square plate of metal attached to the pipe. For a moment, the loud clang drowned out even the hissing of the steam venting from underneath the patch's edge. The troll smith took a step back and flipped open his fogged-up face shield. "Gotten too cold," he declared and shot an expectant look over his shoulder at the violet-clad warlock waiting behind him.

With swishing robes, the magic user approached and levelled his staff at the welded plate. Mumbling some words through the scarf covering his nose and mouth, he let loose with a thin lance of white-coloured flame.

The troll waited, leaning on the long handle of his hammer. "That's enough," he said when the metal glowed a dull red. The sweating creature went back to hammering the seal into shape. With each blow, less steam escaped from the leak. He continued even after the hissing had stopped and only a dull roar. "All done."

"Good work." Snyder, crouching over a circle of carved runes that surrounded the pipe, rose. He pulled three card-shaped pieces of metal out of a leather bag and carefully positioned them around the repaired spot. With metallic clangs, the magnetic plates shot toward the pipe and adhered to its surface. "Now that the place is properly warded, this is one power plant that will not suddenly give out on us, at least."

"Glad to hear it. Now let's leave before our protective enchantments run out, yes?" the warlock requested, already waiting at the doorstep.

Snyder nodded. "Our further presence here would be superfluous."

"Good, I need a drink." The troll leaned his impressive weight against the stone door and pushed it open, grunting from the effort. He was the first to enter the spiral staircase and enjoy the cool draft wafting down from above. A moment later he cried out in alarm and made a desperate grab for the railing when one of the stone steps crumbled under his foot. "Damn it! When is the Empress going to put a stop to this crap?"

"She is working on a solution," Snyder said, well aware that the warlock was listening in on the conversation with great interest.

"She better hurry up," the green creature huffed.

Snyder followed him through one of the many doors leading out of the staircase and into a wider tunnel, while the warlock split away from the group and continued ascending the stairs. In the absence of electrical light, smokeless torches burnt along the brick walls, turning the familiar surroundings into a darker and more foreboding place.

"What's up with all of those prisoners loose and gawking at things in places they have no business being? It's just not right!" The smith lifted his elbow in the direction of a human couple sitting on the ground, with a small child hiding behind the man's back. All three were wearing the toga-like, improvised garb of the local civilians.

"Our Empress has tasked them with keeping an eye on various structures of middling importance, such as an aqueduct in this case," Snyder explained. "The corruption effects seem more reluctant to manifest on objects that are actively being observed."

The troll approached the humans, who shied away from him, and followed their gaze. Through an iron wall grate, he could see a water-filled channel passing perpendicularly underneath the tunnel they were in. "Doesn't look as if it's working to me. There's rubble at the bottom."

"Ah, yes, the countermeasures are somewhat hampered by current lighting conditions. Humans don't see very well in the dark," Snyder

admitted. Wandering attention was another issue, but that could be mitigated by using more observers.

"Bloody useless," the smith decided, shrugged, and followed the acolyte. "You need more metalworking done for your warding?"

"No, I'm headed to the infirmary. My considerable skills will be put to better use dealing with the various unpleasant ailments that keep springing up."

"That so?" The troll grinned, showing his large, crooked teeth. "Good, you can start with my toothache right now."

"...and that's why I need help," Ami said, her hands clasped in front of her chest as she looked at the crystal ball with large, hopeful eyes.

The Avatar scratched his bearded chin and creased his brows. "So Crowned Death has managed to corner you. And is wrecking my lands even more in the process."

Ami thought that he sounded more upset by the latter than by the former. "That's correct, yes." She couldn't help wonder if she had caught him at a bad time. Splashes of blood covered his shiny suit of heavy plate mail, though none of it seemed to be his own. From what she could tell of his surroundings, he was inside a large tent.

The Avatar's eyes lit up, turning a solid, glowing white. "We will help you if you come to one of our temples. Elsewhere, Our influence is not strong enough to stop what is happening. However, if you do, then it would be irresponsible of Us to allow you to leave again."

Ami's shoulders slumped, even if she had expected that condition. "I understand. How much time do I have to explore other options before I commit to something that irreversible?"

"We can save you as long as you arrive before you are banished to the realm of the dark gods," the Light stated with confidence. "Though We would prefer it if you saw reason and came to Us sooner rather than later."

"I'm not willing to give up on getting home just yet. My friends need me, and Metallia needs to be stopped!"

"You are a Keeper!" Amadeus said in his own voice. "Your presence would just make things worse! Haven't you dealt with the dark gods enough by now to understand that?"

"I have learned enough about them to know that the only chance for my world is reaching and destroying Metallia before she regains her strength! My friends can't do it on their own! They don't have an army to counter the forces of the Dark Kingdom!"

The Avatar crossed his arms. "And how, pray tell, do you intend to strike the fiend down for good even if you get there?"

"I-I'll think of something," Ami said. She shifted uneasily from one foot onto the other. "I don't want to be rude, but that discussion is not something I have the time for right now."

Amadeus acknowledged this with a slight incline of his head, but his expression told her that he was far from pleased.

"To be honest, I was hoping that you could help me some other way," Ami continued. "Did you learn anything useful from my notes on dungeon hearts? Some way to stop me from being banished to the dark gods' realm? Perhaps some kind of anchor, or a way to seal the rip in space, or to stabilise my body before it can get sucked through?" she pleaded.

The Avatar's face went slack as the white light returned to his eyes. "The most practical of these suggestions is closing the rift into the dark realm. However, this requires a lengthy ritual. More importantly, the gash must be closed on both sides at the same time. Even if you managed to delay your banishment long enough and convinced some beings in the dark realm to assist you, Crowned Death would certainly sabotage the effort. We know of no way for you to avoid banishment, short of coming to Our temple."

Ami's face fell along with her hopes, and she shivered as her fear returned with full force. "Can you at least offer me advice on how to evade Crowned Death if I should get banished?"

"That would be difficult. For what it is worth, he must observe your dungeon hearts to determine where you will enter his realm. If you lost more than one, he would remain uncertain through which rift you would enter - until the moment you arrive. This might gain you a brief window of opportunity."

Ami nodded as she analysed the situation. She had three dungeon hearts right now, so she could sacrifice at most two. The one she lost to Zarekos counted as another rift. In total, the chance that Crowned Death would wait at the wrong one was two thirds. Those weren't reassuring odds. Should she create more hearts? Each one would be another access point for the corruption, lowering her time limit. Her gold reserves were another issue, since gem production was down.

"Second, there is suicide."

"Excuse me?" Ami blinked, taken aback. They couldn't seriously mean- ?

"It is an option mentioned for completeness' sake," the Light explained. "In the brief moment before a Keeper is devoured by his destroyed dungeon heart, he no longer interacts with the world - which includes his other dungeon hearts. Were you to die during that interval, your soul would simply stop projecting your consciousness into your body. You would effectively find yourself at the location of your soul. You would also be dead and at the mercy of whoever owns it, of course."

Well, that *was* a way to evade the death god, but... "I think I'll pass on that option," Ami said. "Please, do you know of a way to return faster? Zarekos was back much earlier than I anticipated."

Amadeus' lips curved downwards before the Light answered "It is likely that he could use his temple as a navigation beacon to find his way back faster. As an undead creature, the lifeless state of his body in the realm of the dark gods would have hindered him much less than a living Keeper."

Ami nodded. That information could potentially be useful, but would require more research to properly exploit. "But is there anything

else? Perhaps some spell or weapon you could give me that would be useful against a dark god?"

The Avatar snorted, his eyes returning to normal before the Light spoke through him once more. "You do realise that anything charged with Our power would be as debilitating to you as to the enemy, right?"

Ami cringed at a brief mental image of herself wielding a luminous sword while at the same time trying to stay as far away from it as possible.

"Besides," the Light continued, "the merest glimpse of Our power would attract every evil creature in the vicinity. Not the best way to avoid attention."

Ami hung her head. "All right," she said, defeated. With such drawbacks, any gifts from the Light would hurt more than they helped. "Thank you for-"

"Hold. We do not want you to suffer at the hands of the dark gods, and are masters of protection and shielding. Isolating a tiny piece of Our own power so that it cannot be sensed is well within Our capabilities."

"You mean..." Ami perked up, a tentative smile on her face.

"We will think about which tools to grant you in order to assist your escape, but We would prefer it if you did not take such a risk at all."

"Thank you! Thank you so much!" Ami said, her forehead almost touching the table as she bowed deeply.

Amadeus reached for his own crystal ball. "Hmm. Well, if that is all, I'll go and see if the orcs have gathered their courage for another attack, Empress."

"Wait! Avatar, I have another request!" Ami called out as the armoured man turned to leave.

"What?" Amadeus snapped. "I have a Keeper to exterminate here!"

"The hero gates. I may have to evacuate the civilians to a safer place quickly. With everything that's going on, I can no longer guarantee their safety inside my dungeon!"

Amadeus narrowed his eyes at her for several seconds. "A valid concern. I will send you someone who can activate them." He turned toward the left and shouted "Olon!"

A few seconds later, a large hand moved aside the tent flap, and a bare-chested man with bulging muscles stooped down to enter. On one shoulder, he carried a heavy mace, and wild black hair dangled down over his prominent nose. "Lord Avatar?"

"I have a mission for you on the Avatar Islands."

The man's eyes widened a fraction, and he glanced over at the crystal ball.

"You will be operating the hero gates when Empress Mercury requests it, but only for transporting the civilians," Amadeus instructed.

Ami directed a reassuring smile at the man. Having a safe way to move the citizens out of harm's way was a great relief. Particularly since she'd have to turn them into prisoners first if she wanted to ferry them around with Keeper powers.

Olon shrugged, apparently undaunted by the assignment. "Sure, if that's what you wish, Lord Avatar."

Amadeus stepped toward the tent's exit. "Empress, you'll have to arrange for his transport yourself. I am sure your warlocks will be up to it. Olon will be waiting here until they are ready. Farewell." He raised his hand and waved once before he walked out into the sunlight.

A long line of people stood in front of the receptionist's desk, backing up into the street through the wide-open doors of the hospital's entrance hall. Crying children and impatient adults filled the air with complaints, pained groans, and an unpleasant smell.

In one corner of the room, imps had cordoned off an area, contributing to the general lack of space in the crowded room. They were using a small winding tackle to raise one of its six pillars back to where it belonged, glaring at any of the toga-clad individuals that got too close.

Behind the desk, a bald dark elf consulted a list of symptoms that helped her quickly decide where to send the patients. Her forehead creased as she glowered at a toothless crone who disagreed with her assessment.

"End of the waiting line is way back there!" an angry male voice shouted.

The albino woman took the commotion as an opportunity to ignore the obstinate hag and looked for the source of the disturbance. There, in the back, people were swaying to the side as someone pushed his way through the crowd.

"Why aren't the guards doing anything about this?" a hunchbacked man hissed, staring at one of the goblins leaning against the wall and picking her nose.

The triangle-eared creature poked her tongue out at him and slowly pointed a wet-gleaming digit at a spot behind the wavy-haired man clearing himself a path through the crowd.

The hunchback blinked as he spotted the two well-armoured goblins following in the green-shirted man's wake, unable to stay at his side in the limited space.

"Hey! Who do you think you are?" a boy of about ten shouted as he stepped into Jered's path.

"Shush! That's one of the Dark Empress' advisers!" the woman standing behind him said as she draped her arm around him and pulled him back.

Jered arrived in front of the desk, feeling slightly amused by the glower an old woman directed at him as the receptionist ignored her in his favour. "Venna. Where is the Ambassador?" He made no

great effort to prevent his gaze from drifting down to the dark elf's chest, which strained enticingly against its confinement within her white smock.

"The blonde fairy?" Venna's eyes moved sideways toward a map of the building "One floor up, room seven. Up the stairs and to the left."

"Thank you." Jered stepped around her desk and entered a door marked 'Staff only'. "You stay outside," he instructed the goblins. Inside, his nose picked up the smell of alcohol - the horrid stuff that Mercury insisted kept illnesses at bay, not the kind he was more fond of. He had barely taken a dozen steps when a procession of imps marched past, carrying towering heaps of dirty bandages in their arms.

A fairy with short-cropped red hair marched behind them, stomping her feet. When she spotted Jered, she froze and pointed an accusing finger at him!

"Hold it! You are one of the dark empress' chief minions!"

Jered stopped. "What about it?"

Anise came closer until she stood before him, her arms akimbo. It would have been more intimidating if she hadn't been the second-shortest of the seven sisters. "You are pretty well informed, aren't you?"

"You could say that," Jered replied, curious and a little wary. He could make out the shape of two short swords underneath the open lab coat she was wearing, after all.

"I want to know what Mercury did to Camilla that was so bad she had to censor her letter!" Anise hissed, staring at Jered intently.

He had to think for a moment before he remembered the massage incident. Raising an eyebrow, he said "Well, I can guess what *you* are imagining."

"What?" Anise snapped, blushing. "Are you trying to imply something?"

"That you have a dirty mind," the wavy-haired man teased.

The agitated fae growled. "Just tell me already!" she demanded.

Jered found the redhead's indignation rather cute. He might as well have a little more fun at her expense. Light knew his mood needed lifting with everything that was going on. "Sure, sure. Now put that fire away, there's no need for that."

Anise looked at the tiny flames licking up from her clenched fists, then resumed scowling at Jered as she let the magic dissipate.

"Now, your theories are probably based on dear Mercury's less than stellar reputation."

The fairy snorted. "That's putting it mildly."

"However! Anyone who spends some time around her knows that she is easily mortified or embarrassed." He suppressed a grin at the fairy's incredulous look. "Ah, but how to reconcile that with her image?" Jered leaned down and waved her closer, speaking in a low, conspirational voice. "Well, there's something very important that you need to know about the Empress."

Anise narrowed her eyes at him suspiciously before she took a hesitant step forward. "And that is?"

"She has a mischievous sister who can turn into an exact duplicate of her. Camilla might even have mentioned her. Perhaps you should think about the implications." Jered stepped away as Anise's face scrunched up in thought, confident that the seed of the idea he had planted would lead to amusing antics eventually. He wasn't too fond of Tiger, really.

"Hey! You haven't answered my question!" Anise shouted, running the few steps needed to catch up to him.

"And I'm not going to. I'm here for official business with the Ambassador," he said while he kept walking. "Now, don't you have a job to do too?" He pointed at the row of limps blinking owlishly at them.

"I'm *volunteering*!" the redhead clarified. "I'm supposed to be a guard, not a nurse! What kind of poorly organised dungeon is this anyway that you never have enough staff? Besides, it's falling apart!" To illustrate, she rapped the wall with her knuckles, and the plaster crumbled obligingly.

"We are aware of that, no need to poke holes in it," Jered replied, saving his breath to climb the stairs. Now- ah, Ambassador, there you are!" He spotted the youngest fairy's blonde hair from afar. "Could I have a moment of your time? It's official business on behalf of Empress Mercury."

Leaning over an occupied cot along with abbot Durval, Camilla looked up in surprise. She briefly met the old man's eyes as if seeking permission to leave, and the abbot inclined his head. "Very well." A grumpy-looking imp took her blood-stained white gloves, and she motioned for Jered to follow her. With Anise trailing them like a suspicious watchdog, the young ambassador led him to a small room partitioned off by a curtain from the busier part of the building.

Jered let himself drop into one of the simple but functional chairs. "Well, to get straight to the point: the Empress wishes to know if the Shining Concord Empire has a way to get the civilians here off the Islands within the next two or three days."

"What, now she suddenly wants them gone?" Anise almost shouted. "After all the trouble of getting them here?"

"You did point out the lamentable state of the dungeon yourself just before," Jered said.

Camilla shook her head. "That's true enough, but we can't get enough ships here that quickly. Even if it was possible, it wouldn't help; for the same reason the Empress doesn't just make an iceberg." Camilla's nose scrunched up in disgust. "Too many zombie sea monsters besieging this place!"

"The empress has flying ships! She should just use them!" Anise suggested the obvious.

"Why do you think the airships are faring any better than the rest of the dungeon?" Jered asked, stretching his legs. "While you might board one, secure in the knowledge that you have wings, I certainly wouldn't."

Anise frowned and crossed her arms, silently conceding his point.

"So it's getting bad enough that she needs to evacuate the inhabitants?" Camilla wondered.

"Well, nobody has died yet," Jered said cautiously and waved his hand toward the curtain, "but you only have to take a look at the people outside to understand that staying here isn't exactly healthy at the moment."

Camilla nodded, her expression grim and worried. "Are things going to get worse?"

"Potentially. You may want to think about moving from the embassy building to somewhere less exposed to the elements."

"I'd have thought it would be safer on the surface than down here," Camilla pondered. "No ceiling that could fall on one's head, for one."

"Have you seen the windmills outside lately?" Jered asked.

Both fairies shook their heads.

"Neither have I. However, what I did see was a large area littered with fallen towers and half-melted metal struts where they used to be. The weather has become a little unpleasant lately."

"She's being entirely unreasonable about this," the voice from the crystal ball complained. "I've been watching her - and I'm sure I'm not the only one. When she isn't hiding in her fog fooling around with a dungeon heart, she's walking through the halls fixing damage. She's got to have figured out by now that neither will help!"

"Midori, don't you have anything better to do than pestering me?" Cathy answered, her eyelids half-closed.

"And here I thought you'd appreciate my advice. You'll perish along with her when her dungeon falls to corruption or enemies. Which won't be too long now, since she has already wasted an entire day with her futile efforts! Go convince her that accepting my offer is in her best interest!"

Cathy had about enough of princess Julia's cocky voice and played with the thought of finding the nearest sewage pit so she could drop the crystal ball into it. Instead, she swivelled her chair to the side, stood up, and leaned on the balcony's railing.

Below her, under a security net that caught debris falling from above, a crowd of warlocks observed the dungeon through various scrying mirrors. Occasionally, one of them would move over to the pens where teams of four imps waited with construction materials and send them out for emergency repairs.

"Torian, take over here for a while, will you?" she shouted down into the room below. Not waiting for the black-bearded warlock to climb up the stairs, she left the busy room.

"...making a mistake! Come back here!" the crystal ball called after her.

The swordswoman shook her head. Let the head warlock deal with Midori. That Keeper didn't know when to shut up when he didn't have anything of value to say. He had been right about one thing though. It had indeed been almost a day since Mercury had buried herself in her research.

With that thought in mind, she walked down a side corridor that led to where Jadeite should be busy overseeing the acquisition of more food for the dungeon. As she approached the storage room's simple wooden door, she heard the dark general's voice from inside.

"...will no longer be transporting anything flammable until you get the side effects of your teleport under control!"

Curious, Cathy opened the door and peered inside. On the ground, she saw a bald, fin-eared youma lying in a puddle on the ground, looking sooty.

"Sorry, general Jadeite," Lishika said to the dark general, who was glowering at her with his arms crossed.

Seated on one of the bags of flour lined up against the wall, Mareki giggled at her misfortune. Further back in the room, a black-haired woman in charcoal-coloured robes stacked bins full of fruit, moving them as if they were half their real weight. Once done, she took a small bag of gold pieces from a table, saluted in Jadeite's direction, and disappeared into collapsing column of purest darkness.

"Jadeite, have you seen Mercury lately?" Cathy made her presence known.

Jadeite glanced over at the blonde. "Should I have? As far as I know, she's busy researching."

Lishika used the distraction to scramble out of the dark general's sight. Still dripping wet, the youma shimmered and took on the appearance of a young teenager, as appropriate for her short size.

"That's what I thought." Cathy approached the crates and picked up a fresh-looking apple. It wouldn't be the first time that the blue-haired girl had neglected to feed herself while distracted by her books. *"Hey Mercury! Get over here and eat something!"* the swordswoman called out mentally. *"You aren't doing yourself a favour by starving yourself!"*

After a moment, there was a flash of aquamarine light, and the teenager appeared in the midst of a whirl of snowflakes.

"I suppose I could use a break," the blue-haired girl conceded. Her stomach growled in agreement, prompting her cheeks to colour lightly.

Cathy stared wide-eyed at the uneven holes and rips in Ami's senshi uniform. "Why are your clothes rotting off? Are you all right?"

"Just some corruption effects over at the other heart," Ami said tiredly. A piece of discoloured fabric flaked off from her gloves flopped to the ground when she reached for an apple. "Nothing to worry about."

"If you say so." Dubious, Cathy inspected the pale skin she could see through the holes, but there was nothing obviously wrong with it. "Are you making progress?" she asked, curious.

Ami chewed and swallowed. "Some. While calibrating my dungeon hearts to better inhibit the corruption manifestations, I have even made a minor breakthrough!" She smiled a little. "I have figured out how to make a dungeon heart that can handle even actively hostile corruption!" She looked back at the floor. "Still, that doesn't help me with the existing dungeon hearts."

"That is still a huge success. It means you *can* survive this, no matter what happens to the other hearts!" Jadeite said, stepping out of the shadows next to the pile of crates he had been leaning against.

Ami jumped and whirled to face him. "Jadeite! I didn't see you there!" She smoothed her skirt, apparently more self-conscious about the state of her clothing with him in the room, and tore off a small piece of blue fabric in the process.

"You should immediately create a replacement heart so you can disconnect the harmful ones from your territory." Jadeite smiled confidently. "That way, we can defend the dungeon without having to worry about damage control, letting you research in peace."

Ami wiped her bangs out of her face and sighed. "It's not that simple, unfortunately. The uncontrolled corruption that's already here won't recede back to harmless levels in less than two decades."

"Wait," Cathy said, blinking as she considered the tactical implications. "That means you can't build your safe dungeon heart here, and the Avatar Islands are already lost! Mercury, you have to tell me about things like that the moment you learn about them, so I can adjust our strategies!"

"I wanted to be sure that I couldn't come up with a solution first," Ami admitted, sounding uncharacteristically sulky.

"It can't be helped now." Cathy started walking up and down. "The

first order of business is to figure out where we can move to. It can't be anywhere too inhospitable or we won't be able to bring the troops and civilians. Leaving the troops behind simply isn't an option with Crowned Death hunting you and his undead having the advantage in pretty much any hostile environment. So, that means the Underworld portals." She threw a suspicious look at Ami. "Unless you can surprise me with some novel way of mass transport?"

Ami shook her head.

"On short notice, that leaves Clairmonte's former dungeons as the only logical options," Jadeite said. "We have already secured them, after all."

"But I promised not to use them," Ami protested, but not very loudly.

Cathy threw her hands up in the air. "Seriously? That's irrelevant. At that point, you couldn't know this would happen. Now, what would be the best spot? Maps! I need maps!"

Paper rustled as coloured squared appeared from thin air and floated over to the swordswoman. A second set drifted toward Jadeite, while Ami kept the final one for herself.

"The jungle there near the west coast seems good," Jadeite muttered. "Isolated, warm climate, no neighbours."

"Unknown territory, elves live there, diseases, full of stinging insects," Cathy countered. "We don't know anything about other Keepers in the area, either."

"Well, the swamp is right out, seeing how it's already besieged by a surface army," the dark general said, tossing one of the maps away.

"It would be a good location to get the civilians back to their people, though," Ami pondered.

"You don't need to build a dungeon there for that, and once again, I'm staying with you and not going with them," Jadeite cut off that line of thought.

The blue-haired girl frowned, but didn't look too unhappy about his

answer.

"Next up, the Keeper-conquered territory over there." Cathy held up her map. "It's already devastated, so of little interest to either the surface or other Keepers."

"Aside from its neighbours," Jadeite contradicted. "Clairmonte's former minions, and therefore Crowned Death worshippers. They aren't bothering us right now because we aren't doing anything, but I'd prefer not to find out what would happen if we settled down behind their front lines."

Cathy shrugged. "Well, they definitely need killing. Okay, what about the one in the south-west? Wilderness, nice climate."

"It's in the middle of a nation and not far enough from all settlements," Ami objected. "The side effects of forcing control onto the corruption are not exactly subtle. I don't want to fight good people."

"Well, that leaves the glacier," Cathy held up the last map.

"It's a gold mine. Resources are good. It's also in the middle of nowhere, which is even better," Jadeite evaluated.

"That's dwarven territory," Cathy contradicted, "so that would be shooting our diplomatic efforts in the foot. It's also cold!" Goosebumps formed on her skin from merely imagining the snowstorms.

The dark general wasn't willing to let it go. "There's no dwarven settlement nearby-"

"-that we know of," Cathy interrupted.

"- and besides, we could mine our own adamantine there. It's the best choice, in my opinion."

Both of the advisers looked at Ami.

Ami rested her chin on one hand as she thought. "Well, from a safety point of view, the glacier and the jungle seem best. However,

Clairmonte's armoury in the jungle dungeon was similarly well-stocked to the one in the south-west, and he was definitely arming up for a war there." She grimaced. "I think the dwarven territory would be the best option, even with the diplomatic problems that entails."

"Right." Cathy stretched, somewhat relieved that the decision hadn't taken much time. "The sooner you create a dungeon heart there, the more time I will have to send over soldiers and supplies without giving the game away to our enemies with large troop movements."

"I'll make the teleport-capable youma help," Jadeite offered. "A few illusions will go a long way to convince any enemies that we remain at full strength here."

Ami took a long breath and opened her eyes. "All right, you convinced me. I'll establish the core rooms as soon as possible. Give me a call when you and Jered have worked out the logistics and need someone or something transported."

"Will do," Cathy agreed, happy that she could do something to deal with this crisis now. "Does your research require you to remain undisturbed at certain times?"

"Now that you mention it, there's one experiment that I'd prefer to run uninterrupted." The young empress held out her hand, palm facing upward, and a large glass box appeared on it. "Meet my newest lab assistant, soon to be promoted to Keeper!"

Inside the aquarium-like container, a rodent that was unremarkable aside from the layer of gold thread wrapped around its torso peered around curiously.

"Another Keeper rat?" Cathy asked, tilting her head to the side. "Did you learn anything useful from the first one, then?"

Ami rubbed the back of her head with her free hand. "Well, I have confirmed that banished Keepers attracted by destroyed dungeon hearts follow the normal laws of acceleration."

"Err..."

"That means I can delay entering the dark god's realm for longer the further away I am from the dungeon heart," Ami explained without missing a beat.

"Oh. That's usefu- wait, no, it's not. You got banished in mere instants last time, and you were on a different continent then. There's not enough room to get far enough away!" Cathy felt compelled to point out, hoping that Mercury wouldn't take it too hard. To her surprise, the blue-haired girl merely smiled and pointed upwards. The ceiling? No, the sky - oh!

"I'm going to investigate whether or not Keepers can still cast spells while they are being banished," the short-haired teenager said, pointing at the gold thread around the rat. "Afterwards, I'll continue trying to save the existing dungeon hearts. Oh, by the way, I also think that it would be prudent to relocate everyone to the topmost layers of the dungeon while we get ready. I'm going to disconnect the local dungeon heart here, as Jadeite suggested. The remote one dominates the corruption better and will take over."

"The one that makes everything weird and horrible?" Cathy wasn't too keen on adding bleeding walls and random sharp spikes to the serving of decay they already had to deal with.

"We'll be seeing only a little of that, I hope. That was an experiment in keeping the surrounding terrain safe, and I have already inverted those settings. Keeping the inside of the dungeon safe is more important right now," Ami hurried to reassure her. "There, um, may be some tremors or increased volcanic activity though," she added, "hence the relocation."

"So it's really tearing up the landscape now," Cathy concluded, imagining the land crumbling away into deep ravines.

"That should make life more difficult for any invaders, at least," Jadeite said, smirking.

A raven-haired woman coughed until tears welled up in her eyes, doubling over from the effort.

"Aw, are a little smoke and ash too much for you, Monteraine?" a cold voice cut through the howling of the ghosts and the rattling of the chains.

The sorceress coughed once more and turned toward the tall figure standing next to the dungeon heart. A tattered black robe covered it head to toe, but skeletal fingers peeked out from its wide sleeves and gripped a spiralling bone wand tightly. Underneath the being's hood, wheel-like structures spun slowly within the red glow pouring from its empty eye sockets.

"N-no, master Morrigan," Monteraine answered, shivering. Her dress - little more than an apron that struggled to cover the bare essentials - did nothing to protect her from the cold exuded by the ghosts. Backing away from the wall of hungry spectres that tracked her every move, she pressed herself against one of the dungeon heart's frigid pillars.

"I hope the same goes for this plan of yours."

"The eruptions can only be to our advantage," Monteraine hurried to assure her short-tempered Keeper.

"Do not dare fail me," the possessed death priest threatened, "or you will wish I had never given you a second chance."

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Abandon Ship, Part 2 (DARK)

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Ami could barely contain her curiosity as she waited for the Avatar's servant to open the cloth bag he had brought. He was taking a long time to undo the latches with his lumpy fingers, and she fidgeted in her seat as she waited. While the large man was fairly easy on the eyes and still hadn't put a shirt on, Ami spared neither attention nor thought for anything but the contents of the bag. What gifts had the Light thought suitable for helping her?

"Here, Empress. The simplest of the tools granted to you." Olon produced an unadorned white wand from his bag and offered it to Ami.

She leaned forward and took it with two fingers, wary that she would shy away in revulsion from the power hidden within. Her caution proved superfluous, since the tapering stick didn't even make her skin tingle.

"That's a weapon," Olon clarified. "Three shots. Use on dark angels. Wasted on anything stronger. Flashy."

"I see." Ami felt a little underwhelmed. Well, in a way the gift could be useful. It would be beyond terrible if she managed to evade Crowned Death only to be captured by one of his minions. Still, she had been hoping for something a little more impressive. Perhaps the next object would be better?

"A guidance and retrieval tool," Olon stated as he dropped a ball of barely-visible rope on the table. "Looks like separate cords, but is the same one."

"Um..." Ami wasn't sure what to make of that statement. Lying on the white tablecloth before her were several separate rolls of transparent string.

"Same rope, occupying different locations. You have to let it dangle

down into the realm of the dark gods. It grabs you on the way down, so you climb it back up and come out from one of your remaining hearts, since it's all the same rope."

Ami blinked and tried to wrap her head around that. When the explanation still didn't make sense after she had thought it over, she summoned her Mercury computer to have a closer look at the items. The scan only added to her confusion. It confirmed that something was there, but couldn't get a proper visual on it. That was a point in favour of the Light's sensory shielding abilities, really, but also frustrating. "How does that even work?"

"Magic." Olon's bored tone told Ami that he considered that an entirely sufficient explanation.

Ami took one of the coils, which felt solid to the touch, and tugged at it experimentally. It stretched like a rubber band. So she'd essentially be bungee-jumping into the dark gods' realm? Well, aside from sounding slightly silly, that might actually work. Yet... "Can the Light figure out where that rope is? I mean, wouldn't this procedure tell them the exact location of each of my dungeon hearts?"

The mountains of muscle on Olon's arms bulged as he shrugged. "Not my problem." He pulled out a box filled with sawdust and removed a cloth-wrapped object from it. After removing the padding, he put a small flask filled with luminous liquid onto the table. "Final item. An invisibility potion. Short duration. The longest it can be without revulsion becoming completely debilitating. Inert until voluntarily triggered. Drink as soon as possible."

Ami uncorked the bottle and sniffed at its opening. The potion smelled spicy, but it wasn't any aroma she could recognize. Her computer was being just as unhelpful as with the rope. Should she really imbibe something she couldn't identify? In the end, it was a matter of trust. She put the flask back on the table. There was simply no way that anything the Light did to her would be worse than what Crowned Death was planning.

Her body shifted and flickered when something black flew out of its back, reverting into an ice statue. The red-eyed cloud of dark energy

that was Ami coalesced into a crimson-eyed teenager wearing a black senshi uniform. From behind the dark-clad golem in her likeness, she raised one hand, and the potion rose into the air and approached her. She snatched the floating flask out of the air and emptied it in a single, long gulp.

Olon raised an eyebrow at her. "You are an odd one, for a Keeper. Or desperate."

"But I don't want to leeeave! We got a really nice house here!" a small boy protested, holding onto a pillar with one hand. He didn't seem to notice that the brittle stone stained his fingers with chalky powder. A few of the other villagers waiting for their turn either grinned or frowned as they stood in the slowly-moving line.

The adult man who held the child's other hand gently pulled him along. "Come now, Yorik. You are going to annoy the guards." He looked around as if expecting one of the orcs to step forward with ill intent. Quickly, he moved along toward the more reassuring figure of Abbot Durval.

"It is downright bizarre how quickly some people forget that they are living under a Keeper," Roselle said, looking at the boy. Only the upper body of the orange-haired fairy was visible; the rest disappeared behind the wafting hero gate she was leaning through. "Or maybe it's because he's still a child. Isn't that right, Sir Olon?"

The large, muscular man standing next to her with his arms crossed over his bare chest simply grunted non-committally.

"It has to be so amazing, working directly under the Avatar," the orange-haired fairy continued, batting her eyelashes at him. "Have you known him for long?"

Olon inclined his head, causing his black mane to fall over his eyes.

Roselle took a blindfolded civilian by the hand and gently guided the pale-looking woman through the hero gate. After barely a second, she reappeared from the portal. "So what does it feel like, being

back here? If that isn't too personal a question?"

The hero gate operator shrugged. "Not a native."

"Hey fairy! Stop slowing things down with your flirting!" a familiar, unwelcome voice called.

A hush fell over the room when the Empress herself stepped through the doorway, a scowl on her face. Many nervous eyes watched the black-uniformed teenager warily as their owners tried to make themselves unnoticeable.

Roselle sputtered, her cheeks colouring. "But I'm not slowing- I mean flirt- um-"

"Everyone, at ease and back to evacuating. Don't mind me being here." Mercury's red-glowing gaze swept over the room, coming to a rest on an elderly, white-robed figure. "Durval. I heard there was some trouble here?"

The abbot was massaging the region around the eyes of a male patient with his wrinkly hands, and barely glanced over his shoulder when she addressed him. "A wall has collapsed over at Snyder's station. Now," he said, turning back to his patient "can you still feel my touch? No? Good. Go, get yourself a bandage, and join the line moving through the portal."

Some of the civilians and a few of the guards stared in amazement at the old man who had dared treat the dark empress like a minor distraction. One leather-clad mistress in particular backed away until her back hit the none-too-solid masonry, her teeth clattering.

"What are you looking at? I can find some more physically demanding work for you if keeping the peace without being distracted is too much for you!" The empress scolded. Without a further word, she turned on her heel and walked out.

"She seems to be... in a bad mood today?" Roselle speculated as she listened to the retreating footsteps, which were soon drowned out by the sound of construction.

"Tiger? I'm going to bring you to my lab," Ami's voice rang out in the youma's mind, distorted by her communication spell.

In an instant, the fresh new brickwork in front of Tiger disappeared, and she found herself looking at the blue-haired girl. "Think I should mirror the dark circles under your eyes too if I'm supposed to be your double?" she teased, patting her black and golden uniform.

"No, no. I've got a different task for you now," Ami said in a harried tone, not reacting to the quip.

"Aww. Walking around and terrorising the minions was kind of fun. I just wish there had been less repair work involved. That's not what my earth-shaping spells were meant for. So what's up?" Tiger found an empty spot between the stacks of paper on the table and sat down.

"Well, since the space rat experiment confirmed that one of my ideas is viable-" Her computer beeped, prompting her to pause and swivel on her chair in order to enter a few commands. She turned back to Tiger. "Sorry about that. Anyway, I need to figure out a very specific glamour spell, and you know how bad I am at those."

"And since I am a lot better at that, you want me to do it instead and then possess me and pick the skill from my head?" Tiger guessed.

Ami blinked. "That's exactly right."

"Why me and not Jadeite?" the youma asked, reverting to her tiger-striped real form. "Since you have no time to lose, you'd better get the best person on the job." She grimaced. "As much as it pains me to say, he's much better at glamour than me, being a dark general and all."

"Technically, *I'm* a dark general too," Ami pointed out. "Anyway, I think you are uniquely qualified for this. Here," She tossed a small notebook over at her adopted sister, "I've already written up everything you need to know."

Tiger skimmed the first few lines and raised an eyebrow. "Huh. Yeah, I see where you are coming from."

"But can you do it?" Ami asked, her hands clutched before her chest.

Tiger looked up from the instructions, meeting Ami's pleading eyes. "I don't see why not. It's pretty close to what I do anyway. Kind of morbid, though."

A rope cordon split the cavern in front of the Underworld portal into two. On one side, a steady procession of civilians with blood-stained blindfolds stumbled slowly into the orange glow, one hand on the rope. On the other, plate-armoured orcs and scythe-wielding goblins escorted imp-pulled carts laden with crates. Like the civilians, the little workers were heading out into the Underworld with their cargo.

"Careful with that! Watch out for that pot-hole!" Cathy called as she hurried across the cavern with loudly ringing footsteps.

Her warning came just a moment to late. One of the carts tipped over when its left wheel lost contact with the ground and spilled a large metal-clad box on the ground. Making "Uh oh" noises, the imp crew scattered as the container bounced a few times, ringing like a bell.

Cathy muttered curses under her breath when pebbles and stones rained down from the ceiling, loosened by the noise. Stupid Corruption! "Caravan, stop!" the swordswoman ordered, a deep scowl visible through her open visor. "You over there! The imps loading the carts! Stop what you are doing and fix that hole!" She slowed her pace and walked around the fallen crate, inspecting its metal-plated exterior for damage. She didn't see any, but was still worried. "I hope that didn't damage the gems," she muttered to herself.

"How can you tell what's in that chest, boss?" One of the orc guards assigned to the toppled vehicle asked. "They all look the same to me." He pointed at the pile of similar containers stacked close to the portal, gleaming faintly in the hazy light.

"It would be harder if they didn't all contain the same thing," Cathy

explained absently. With the enhanced strength her armour provided, she flipped the wooden cart back on its wheels and dragged it away from the pothole.

"All- ? But- Lots?" the guard stuttered, momentarily speechless as his eyes widened underneath his jutting brow. He settled on staring slack-jawed at the amount of wealth stashed in this chamber.

"Well, the Empress *is* rich," the blonde explained. The gems carried by the caravan represented an absurd amount of wealth, which was part of the reason why she was overseeing things personally. The other was the security of the civilians, but she didn't think anyone would try to steal those. Even with all the guards, a number of reaperbots, and all the youma on standby, she felt incredibly nervous about crossing the short section of Underworld between the portals. She should have asked Mercury to unleash Rabixtrel there, dammit! "Guard the crates with your life," she snapped at the orc. "You don't want to disappoint her Majesty here!"

"Commander! Commander!" a squeaky voice shouted, drawing the swordswoman's gaze toward the stairs leading to the surface. A goblin was sprinting toward her, using his small size to weave through small gaps between soldiers and vehicles.

With a sideways glance at the blind civilians being led from the hero gate to the portal, she moved towards the panting warrior. "No need to shout, I'm right here," she said. If this was bad news, she didn't want the crowd to overhear them and panic.

"Spotted something," the wheezing creature reported. "Must come see immediately! Movement!"

Cathy frowned and followed after the greenskin, easily keeping pace at a light jog. Enemies here? This particular portal was about eighty kilometres away from the main dungeon, and far less fortified. It was the only one leading to the gold mine, though. "What is it? The undead?"

"Ghosts! Is huge! Call Empress!"

Okay, that did sound like an emergency. Cathy pulled ahead and left

the goblin behind as she bounded up the stairs as fast as she could. *Mercury? A goblin tells me we might have a situation here!*

Ami enjoyed the rare luxury of sunlight warming her skin as she surveyed the landscape, searching the fields of drying mud for any signs of the so-called ghosts. Briefly, her gaze wandered up to the shimmering surface of the hero gate hovering a few metres above the landscape, surrounded by a ring of ruins. More civilians kept emerging from the wafting gateway and stepping onto the newly-built ramp leading down and underground. She felt a little queasy seeing them step out of the gate and immediately grasping at the bandage covering their eyes.

One of the fairies accompanying the civilians down to safer terrain glared at Ami for a moment before disappearing underground with the two little girls she was leading by the hand.

Ami found that rather unfair. It wasn't *her* fault that the civilians had to be evacuated, and it wasn't as if she wanted to re-open their wounds. Unfortunately, Jadeite couldn't be in more than one place at the same time like the Light's weird rope. Maybe she should-

"What the hell is that?" Cathy shouted.

Ami turned to face the blonde and found her staring up at the sky. She followed the swordswoman's gaze up to the edge of a distant cloud of volcanic ash. "Oh. So that's why Rabixtrel is annoyed."

"Huh?"

"He can't find any ghosts to kill if they are all up there," Ami elaborated, not taking her eyes off the giant swarm of spectral figures whirling tornado-like around the central object. It really did look as if someone had collected all the remaining ghosts on the Avatar Islands they could find.

"Worrying about your reaper's peace of mind is *not* the right reaction to a giant - well, whatever that is - surrounded by enough ghosts to make it hard to see!" Cathy squinted as she tried to see through the

multiple layers of flying undead.

"It looks like a giant wasp nest to me," Ami said. She had gotten herself a crystal ball and was peering into it. With the orb's closer point of view, she could discern more details. Many of the ghosts were chained to the structure, holding it aloft. "I think there's a dungeon heart inside," she added after a moment and passed on the crystal ball.

"What? Aren't wasp nests made from paper? Who makes a dungeon from something like that?" Cathy asked and stared into the sphere too.

"Someone who figures that it needs to be lightweight and able to hide out above the clouds?" The permanent thunderstorms that had covered the land before she had changed the corruption settings would have shielded the thing from detection. It wasn't much larger than her own airships, but without any of the space being dedicated to providing lift, that meant there was a lot of room inside. "I assume the paper is just thick enough that it can be fortified by imps."

"Right. How about you set the thing on fire?"

"On it." Ami concentrated briefly, drawing on some of the gold still in her treasury.

High up in the air, a spark of fire detonated right next to the ash-coated skin of the enemy vessel. The firestorm spell expanded outwards a short distance before being smothered by the ghosts that flowed like water around the flying base. When the glow faded, the hull remained intact.

"It seems we aren't the only ones who know a fire immunity spell," Ami commented when she saw that the attack hadn't done anything aside from wiping away some of the volcanic soot sticking to the paper-like substance.

"Well, they do say that imitation is the most sincere form of flattery. Speaking of which, don't those rolled-up things at the sides look suspiciously like the tubes you used on Dreadfog to get your troops to the ground?"

"I think you are right." Ami summoned a map and compared the position of the object with the terrain features. "Hmm. It's not moving toward the dungeon directly. I think it might try to seize territory somewhere over there." She indicated a region to the north-east of her main dungeon.

Cathy's face darkened. "Looks about right. That would be just out of range of your dungeon heart, and there are three portals in the area for calling in reinforcements."

"A fairly conservative strategy," Ami noted.

"Yeah, what with the whole flying dungeon and all. I assume you are working on stopping it?" the blonde looked at Ami expectantly.

"Well, lightning bolts would be pointless. I'd just hit some ghosts. This is just like Zarekos' ablative ghost armour, except ship-sized. Hmm, perhaps... " Ami decided to try something new. Remotely, she cast Shabon Spray multiple times, aiming almost a kilometre above the vessel. When she was satisfied with the size of the mist she had created, she started drawing its droplets together. She didn't form a hand from water as she usually did. Instead, she sculpted a large ice spike from the liquid and hurled it at the mass of ghosts below. Aiming was problematic at this distance, even if the air was relatively calm today. Nearly a ton of fast-moving ice reacted only sluggishly to telekinetic course corrections.

The icicle hit the layer of ghosts and passed through it as if it wasn't even there, struck the vessel itself, and disappeared inside.

"Yes!" Cathy thrust her fist in the air, grinning at the crystal ball. "You poked a hole in it! Keep doing whatever you did!"

Ami smiled. She hadn't done much damage, but now that she knew that her idea worked, she could simply use a larger projectile. The red glow in her eyes intensified as a cloud appeared above the ghost vessel, big enough to be visible unassisted even from down here.

Then, without warning, a circular hole appeared in the mist, expanding outwards until all of it was gone.

"Darn it! What happened?" the blue-haired senshi blinked in confusion.

"There's a Keeper standing on top of the nest," Cathy informed her, pointing at the crystal ball. "Looks as if he's possessing a death priest. He's just staring at the sky and has a weird spinning pattern in his eyesocke-" She stopped when the scrying device in her hand blanked out for a moment. "Huh, weird. It did that when he was looking directly at me."

"That sounds like Azzathra's anti-magic spell. It's weird that one of his Keepers is working together with the undead, though." Ami turned away from the enemy. "That will prevent most easy forms of attack. Change of plans: we speed up the evacuation. Get everyone and everything to the new dungeon as soon as possible."

"What, we are running away without a fight?" Cathy sounded upset. "What if that thing follows us?"

"Then we will at least face it without the handicap of our best tools falling apart from lethal corruption."

"What about your research? I'd have thought you'd be more upset about not being able to search for a better solution."

The blonde sounded worried, so Ami smiled reassuringly. "I- well, by now I'm pretty sure that there *isn't* one. I may as well get things over with now and catch Crowned Death ahead of schedule." She shivered despite the hot day. "Besides," she faced the flying dungeon and frowned at it, "its presence here gives me some options I didn't have before."

The winged silhouettes of the fairies and of Olon's broad back disappeared into the portal's orange glow, leaving Ami, Jadeite, and Tiger alone in the cavern.

"That's the last of them. Finally," the Tiger-striped girl said. "We are the only ones still here."

Ami nodded, sweating underneath her new armour now that the time

to actually implement her risky plan had come. It was hot in the outfit, which resembled an ancient diving suit. It was also heavy. The troll smiths fortunately hadn't asked too many questions about Ami wanting a suit made of pure gold. Perhaps such requests were expected from a Keeper. In any case, she would have felt awkward wearing something so ostentuous if the situation wasn't so serious. "Remember, install the ropes fifteen minutes from now and have the youma use the appropriate precautions," she said, mostly to distract herself from her nervousness.

Jadeite looked irritated for a moment. "Of course. As if I would forget something that important."

Ami inclined her head, her cheeks reddening. "Yes, I'm just- well- I hope I'll be seeing you again. And if I don't-"

He raised a hand. "Don't even consider the possibility. I have confidence that you will pull this off."

"I- right!" She replied with a small smile, her spirit lifted. "I'll be seeing you all again very soon!" Her face fell as she turned to Tiger. "Still, you know what to do if I shouldn't come back. Mother and my friends-"

"Yeah, yeah, that's not going to happen anyway," the tiger-striped girl said. "No need to get overly emotional. We'll all be joking about this soon enough." Then, she surprised Ami by taking a step forward and gathering her into a brief, strong hug. "Take care, little sister!" Tiger let go and turned to the portal. She winked at Ami "And not a word about this to anyone!"

"Until later," Jadeite said, saluting before he followed Tiger into the glow.

Once they were gone, Ami gulped and turned to the small cage that stood on the ground. "All right. Now it's only the two of us," she said as she freed a small bat from its cage.

The animal fluttered out and grew, morphing into a pale young man wearing a wide-sleeved black robe. He immediately dropped to one knee and lowered his head.

"Ilian, please rise," Ami instructed, uncomfortable with his gesture of submission. "I'm glad you volunteered for this assignment despite knowing what is about to happen. I'm aware that I have been neglecting you vampires somewhat, but with the death god out to get me..."

"We are grateful that your Majesty simply chose to lock us away, rather than picking a more permanent solution," the vampire said. He got to his feet in a single, flowing motion.

"Still, I appreciate what you are doing. Don't worry, we will take good care of your coffin. Good luck!"

"To you as well, your Majesty."

Ami put on her helmet, connected her oxygen tanks, and used her scanner to see if her space suit was ready to go. Everything came up green. Half eager and half resigned, she took a last look at her surroundings and breathed out heavily. It was time to be off.

In the darkness of space, the stars were brighter than even the darkest night. After a dozen teleports, the planet from which Ami had come looked only barely brighter than the other luminous dots. Its moon was also visible, but only barely. The sun alone remained almost as bright as she was used to.

Ami didn't spend much time admiring her surroundings. She would have enough time for that on the way back. According to her calculations, she should arrive exactly twenty minutes after destroying her dungeon hearts. Enough time for her preparations, but not enough for her air to run out - but only if she didn't procrastinate. It was time to deal with the issue of the invaders trying to take her land. They would learn why it was a bad idea to corner her.

Ami's jaw set in a determined expression, and the unholy light in her eyes flared bright. She would take a page out of Nero's book - literally.

On the distant planet, underneath a glacier, a looted magical tome flew from its shelf and opened itself.

Morrigan's laughter was carrying far through the air, even if it had to compete with the endless moaning and howling of the ghosts and the rattling of their chains. "Her troops are abandoning her! There's nothing but traps to slow us down, and they are falling apart!"

Monteraine, for her part, didn't share his good mood. Sure, she knew that her idea with the ghost-powered flying dungeon accounted for any countermeasures that Empress Mercury could deploy against it, but the enemy Keeper had a reputation for springing nasty and fatal surprises on her enemies. Then, she felt a very odd sensation. With the fluidity borne from long practice, she uttered the syllables of a divination spell to figure out what had just happened.

"Oh. Oh crap!" Monteraine's crystal ball dropped from her grasp, struck the paper floor, and rolled away. Mercury had indeed surprised her, but it wasn't with any trick that had never been seen before. This was very old magic indeed. On the bright side, it should guarantee Morrigan a victory. On the other, it would most certainly kill *her*.

With an audible clink, the discarded orb collided with the skeletal toe of the death priest possessed by Morrigan. Immediately, its skull turned its glowing eye sockets in the sorceress' direction. "What is it, witch?" the Keeper hissed.

"M-Mercury has decided to force a decision right now! She's going to drag everyone to her dungeon heart for a final battle!"

"Why would she do that?" Morrigan's loud and boisterous voice sounded mildly confused. "Does she want me to put her out of her misery that badly? We outnumber her by an outrageous- the ghosts!" The black-robed figure lost some of its dignity as it waved its arms and shouted at the spectres "Land! Bring us down right now!"

Monteraine stumbled as the floor seemed to drop away underneath her.

"As for you..." Morrigan whirled around and pointed at the scantily-clad sorceress. A red spark sprang from the tip of his bony fingertip and sped towards her.

The frightened woman jumped aside, but was too slow. In mid-lunge, magic washed over her, and she could feel her skin crawl as her limbs started to shorten.

Ami's spell went off after six minutes counted down, stripping Morrigan's dungeon of its ghost. It also picked up roving bands of zombies that she had been unaware of, and crammed all of the undead into the spacious vault holding her dungeon heart. Before the wrathful creatures had time to attack either the artefact or the single vampire that had been brought here along with them, the explosives went off.

It wasn't as impressive as a chlorine trifluoride fire, but the detonation was still big enough that the surface above the dungeon lurched before sinking back and forming a depression in the ground. Tiger would have been proud of her sister.

After the brief but intense flash of pain caused by the loss of the three dungeons hearts that had become a liability, Ami felt a sharp jerk that sent her hurtling back toward the planet. No going back now. Instead, she had to make sure that Crowned Death would not be waiting for her when she arrived.

With full concentration, Ami began to weave the glamour that Tiger had developed for her, fuelling the spell with the gold from her armour. That should give it enough reality to stand up to a cursory inspection, even if it would still dissipate after a few hours.

In front of her, a human-shaped lump formed and slowly gained more definition.

The trick was giving the death god what he wanted. Her decoy slowly turned into a perfect copy of her civilian form - the one she would revert to once she entered the dark realm. Of course, no glamour would be able to make it convincingly act like her, even if the copy was accurate down to the organs.

Ami looked into her double's dead eyes for a moment and put her index finger to its temple. She hesitated, averted her gaze, and then fired a lightning spell that literally blew its brain out. There. Now it looked as if she had committed suicide in order to escape, like the Light had suggested.

Still not looking at the fake corpse lest her stomach rebel, the young Keeper prepared to teleport once more. She would adjust her course so that she would hit the Arctic rift half a minute after her decoy hit the one on the Avatar Islands.

The atmosphere shot past Ami in a dazzling blur, and she had barely time to blink before the ground rushed to meet her. On pure reflex, she kept her eyes closed, instinctively fearing a collision with the unavoidable obstacle.

Something struck her like a physical blow, and for a moment, she believed that she *had* slammed into the ground. It took her an instant to realise that the sensation rattling her bones was noise, its intensity doubly shocking after the soundless vacuum of space. What was causing it? She seemed to be moving away from the source of the cacophony at a breakneck pace, judging by the rate at which it receded in volume. Was she still going as fast as she had before the transition into the realm of the dark gods? The absence of light made it hard to judge distances.

From further away, the noise was only about as loud as a plane during lift-off, which allowed Ami to recognise it for what it was: roars of anger in a terrifyingly familiar voice. Crown- she slammed her hands over her mouth as she stopped herself from thinking the name. That wouldn't be safe in this realm. *He* must have caught her fake corpse and wasn't taking her presumed escape well at all, from the sound of it.

The teenager felt some tension leave her muscles. If the death god had fallen for the ruse, then he wasn't actively searching for her right now. It also meant that he had been able to rapidly hunt down the decoy and that she had been far, far closer to him than she ever wanted to be, but she preferred not to dwell on that. Now, she needed to get out of here fast, since she had no intention to explore the deeper regions of the dark gods' realm.

Her hands moved to her chest, patting down the blouse of her school uniform as she searched for a piece of cord. She found it clinging to her waist, feeling sticky like a strand of spider web. Her mood lifted some more. This gift from the Light gods had latched onto her the moment she entered through the rift, performing as advertised so far. It could eventually reel her in on its own just fine, but that would take time. More important was that it told her which way she should head.

With a destination firmly in mind, Ami reached for her beaded necklace, courtesy of Jadeite. Somewhat disappointingly, there had been nothing romantic about the present. Each of the beads contained a small amount of life energy, just enough to enable a spell. She crumpled one of them between thumb and index finger, yanked on the rope, and catapulted herself toward the world of the living.

The distorted mirror image of Cathy's face stared back at her from the smooth surface of the dungeon heart. Frozen in mid-pulse, the orb's glow remained a dull but steady red.

"I don't like the look of this thing," she whispered as she waited for Mercury to return. The artefact resembled the girl's previous customised model, with the four pillars buckling about halfway up and meeting above the central sphere to form a pyramid. She didn't have an issue with that, but the patterns that decorated the black stone disturbed her. They were only abstract at first glance. If she looked at them for too long, then the edges and corners formed leering, demonic faces and horned skulls. "Do you think she will be all right?" She asked, choosing to look at the rope provided by the Light instead. Tied to one of the arches, it had gone taut a few

seconds ago and disappeared straight into the centre of the red sphere.

With a sudden hiss and whip-like crack, the cord sprang from the dungeon heart. After smacking against the ceiling, it dropped down, swinging left and right.

Jadeite followed the frayed end of the rope with his eyes. "It- looks as if we will have to try that other plan she rejected." He turned abruptly on his heel. "I'm going back to the Avatar Islands. Any missing minions will be with me."

Snyder put a hand on his shoulder, causing him to stop. "What about the civilians? She wouldn't want you to harm them."

"Fortunately, I am not an overly idealistic teenager and can make the right choices, even if they upset her," Jadeite replied.

"And their eyes?"

Above the dark general's upwards-facing palm, a swirling ball of energy appeared, its growing brightness making the rest of the room feel darker. "Haven't been restored yet. They will be unconscious now and unable to worry about them," he stated coldly.

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Abandon Ship, Part 3 (DARK)

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Ami's eyes widened in horror as she found herself at the end of the rope, with no sign of her dungeon heart anywhere in the surrounding darkness.

"Clever. For a mortal. I approve." A flat, female voice came from every direction at once, its source invisible.

Startled, Ami flinched. Her right hand jerked upwards toward her necklace. Before she could grab the beads, something thin and pointy stabbed her in the back and emerged from underneath her collarbone before piercing her lower arm and arresting its motion.

"The sound of Crowned Death's disappointment fills me with glee," the unknown voice continued as if nothing out of the ordinary had just happened. Despite the much louder roars of the death god worrisomely close by, its words were clear and understandable.

Too shocked to listen, Ami pawed with her left at the thin, crystalline spike that pinned her in place.

"A mere precaution. You would have tried to flee. It does not even hurt," the owner of the voice said, perhaps noticing the girl's distraction.

That was true, Ami realised through her fear and confusion. There was no pain; there was only the awful, sickening feeling of something stuck in her flesh that didn't belong there. Nothing reassuring about that. She had been run through and captured by something that felt impaling her was a good conversation starter!

"I am the Unraveller of Mysteries," the voice continued. "You have caught my interest, Keeper Mercury."

The Unraveller, another dark god! Ami's heart would have raced in terror, but like the last time she had been banished to this realm, it

was not beating. A detached part of her mind noted that this probably explained the lack of bleeding. With her Keeper sight, she followed the shaft of the spike back to its origin.

As if in reaction to her inquiry, bluish lines appeared in the glass-like material of the weapon. They ran parallel to each other, moving downwards until they reached the base of the spike, and then spread out in every direction. Soon, their glow expanded to cover a flat panel about the size of a parking lot.

The pattern of the lines reminded Ami of a picture of a microchip under a microscope that she had once seen. She had never heard of a microchip that fractured and folded itself into a three-dimensional arrangement of spirals, though. The more the dark god shifted into visibility, the more frightened she became. It was enormous! Winding crystal arches as tall as mountains loomed up around her, composed of meticulously arranged panels and pyramids. Farther away, lights flickered around jagged spires that jutted up from the horizon.

Ami's mind went over that last thought again. She had been trapped by an entity large enough to have a *horizon*. A close one, but still! She had to get away! Despite the risk of aggravating her wounds, she attempted to move, but a wave of weakness centred on the spike paralysed her limbs when she tried. "W-what do you want?" she asked meekly. Secretly, her thoughts raced, seeking for a way out.

"I want you to worship me. Also, I have questions. You will answer them."

Ami gulped. "I'm flattered you'd go through all this effort to make me this offer, but..." she trailed off, unsure what she could say that wouldn't trigger an immediate torture session. And questions? Not good. She needed to leave! Perhaps her other gift from the Light could- no, stealth was pointless while she was pinned like a moth to the Unraveller's surface. How could she - of course! Her Keeper powers! She could squish a bead with them and teleport away! Without hesitation, she put pressure on one of the tiny spheres, feeling it give for a few millimetres before it turned hard as diamond.

"None of that," the Unraveller chided. A glowing, hexagonal panel not much larger than the teenager rose from below and split up into six identical triangles, which started orbiting the girl. One of them continued splitting into smaller components, and a shard no larger than Ami's palm shot forward and past her neck.

Cut apart, her necklace drifted toward the centre of a formation of counter-rotating, glowing tiles.

The remaining shards darted towards Ami like a whirling swarm of scalpels. Almost soundlessly, they sliced through her clothing, closing in far enough that she could feel their tips brush over her skin. Despite her shivering, none of them drew blood. After a moment, they withdrew, carrying along everything Ami had been wearing on her person.

The glowing lines on the panels surrounding the necklace turned red. "Functional but flavourless. No souls. Suitable for its apparent purpose. Minimal usefulness or amusement value outside of it." Soft blue light pulsed with each syllable the dark god spoke, and a few of the smaller polygons cut one of the beads apart with their edges. "Storage method using known principles." The motion of the animated pieces of geometry stopped. "Uninteresting."

Ami watched in despair as the amulet was tossed aside like a piece of thrash, becoming smaller and smaller as it tumbled away into the infinite darkness. She suppressed a whimper when the dark god extracted something else from the shreds of her clothing. The finger-long wand would be extremely hard to explain away.

"Weapon. Antithetical energies." The little rod turned and spun under the dark god's scrutiny. "One shot. Storage capacity severely under-dimensioned. Unable to cause more than momentary, local discomfort. Useless. The implications of its presence are more intriguing."

This time, the dark god didn't simply toss the object into the void. A pitch-black, cube-shaped box formed around the wand and shrunk away into nothingness, accompanied by crunching noises.

The dark entity's attention became palpable as it pressed down on

Ami and caused tiny arcs of static electricity to dance between her hairs. "I wish to know how you coaxed the hated Light into providing you with toys."

Ami remained silent. What could she say that wouldn't damn her more, anyway? She cringed when hundreds of golden needles as long as her forearm flew into her field of view. Rather than digging into her flesh to punish her for her silence, the needle-shapes instead chased the ribbons of cloth that had once been her clothing. To her great relief, the Unraveller's attention withdrew. The dark god didn't seem to be in any hurry to get answers.

Moving chaotically like a swarm of flies, the spines reconstructed Ami's outfit as if it was a large puzzle. The dark entity never once hesitated as she separated the bits into different piles, not even when she had to determine whether pieces of cloth belonged to a left or right sock. Just as fluidly, she put them into the right positions with the right orientations. When she was done, intact-looking articles of clothing floated in the space before Ami, the gaps separating their pieces barely visible.

The process would have been fascinating to watch under different circumstances, the terrified girl thought bitterly. Paralysed, naked, and uncomfortably aware of the spike piercing her flesh, she couldn't spare thoughts for anything other than escape. Lacking other ideas, she started surveying the environment. Crowned Death howled somewhere nearby and wasn't likely to improve the situation. She thought she felt the presence of something else farther back, but wasn't sure. Her attention moved on to the stair-like slabs of crystal forming a deep valley around her. Were there people frozen within the wider blue lines?

A random pulse of light raced across the transparent material. It crossed a section where the blue was tinted violet, and Ami caught a thankfully brief glimpse of the smaller shapes within. Her stomach lurched. Yes, people, in various states of disassembly. Despite her lifeless state, she started hyperventilating as she got an inkling of where the Unraveller's title came from.

The dark god completely ignored Ami's distress, and her needles took formation around the first sock. "Clothing. Made from unknown

fibre." One of the spines split apart at one end until it vaguely resembling a very narrow octopus with its six new arms. Its limbs came apart at the tips in the same way, and after several more steps of this, it was a bristly, tree-like structure. The Unraveller used the undulating instrument to pull threads from the cloth and tear them into finer fibres. "Not plant either. Not treated with magic." By now, the thread looked like a ball of fine fluff. "Mineral or artificial?"

The motion of the microscopic tendrils reversed direction, and they spun the fibres back into a single thread, which they inserted back into the weave. "Properties somewhat akin to silk. Inferior to spider silk." Moving almost too fast to see, the many-pronged tool caressed the sock, sewing the different pieces back together and leaving no trace that they had ever been separate. "No surprises."

The bristly instrument melted back into a needle shape and rejoined the swarm, which moved to encircle the watch it had salvaged from a pocket of Ami's school uniform. With quick and mechanical efficiency, the instruments disassembled it and lined up its individual components next to each other.

"Time piece. Good craftsmanship." The orbiting motions of the glowing shapes picked up speed. "Where are the springs? No magic detected either. Combustion or creature-powered? No. How can it work?"

The pieces blurred as the dark god reassembled them, observed the result for only an instant, and took the mechanism apart once again. This time, she built a construction of her own design from the pieces that didn't resemble the original watch in the slightest. It also failed to move at all. "Not this." Not deterred in the slightest, the dark entity tried anew. "Not this either. Oscillating crystals. Why?"

Ami relaxed as much as she dared when she realised that the Unraveller was talking to herself. She certainly wasn't complaining about the dark god ignoring her in favour of reassembling the pieces again and again in increasingly random-looking arrangements. But how could she get away? There had to be something she could do. Should she try triggering the potion? To what end? She'd never be able to get away far enough while it lasted with Keeper powers alone, even if she somehow got off this skewer.

Zarekos' temple had seen better days, but the general air of decay and ruin only served to make the atmosphere more oppressive. As if the circle of vampires praying to the dark empress and staring straight ahead with blank looks hadn't done a good job of that already. Camilla shivered. Intellectually, she knew that the bloodthirsty things wouldn't harm her. Their minds had been leashed by warlocks. Somehow, that didn't make her feel better.

How had she ended up back here, on a toxic continent, in the middle of a ritual to bring back a great evil? Oh, yeah. She was being coerced to participate by an absurdly powerful sorcerer. Seriously, how could he just turn that statue of Zarekos into one of Mercury with a wave of his hand? Okay, so he had only changed the head, but still... "Why would I want to bring that Keeper back? You can't make me help you!" she protested, flapping her wings harder than necessary.

"Nobody is forcing you, Ambassador. The ritual will work without your help, if not as well. Look!" He showed her a brilliant ball of light that rotated above his palm, tendrils snaking outwards. "Here in my hand, I hold the life force of the civilians in Mercury's dungeon."

The fairy gasped.

"It is slowly being sent to the her so she can use her powers in the realm of the dark gods," the curly-haired general continued with his explanation. "Now, the vampires inform me that someone who can attune to the tower could serve as a gateway for prayer, channelling it to its intended target much more efficiently. Sadly, we don't have anyone who can do that aside from you." Jadeite met her gaze with his steel-blue eyes, his expression dead serious. "Now, I intend to continue with the ritual until the Empress is back or until the energy is used up. If you decided to help us, it would last much longer."

Camilla blinked at him. He- he couldn't be serious? But... there was no hint of deception or regret in his expression. Reluctantly, she concluded that he would indeed do exactly what he had said. "But they will- you are a monster!" she spat heatedly, blood rushing to her face as she balled her fists in anger. She couldn't just abandon

those people to their fate! "Fine! I'll help you! But I'm not ever going to forget this!"

Ami didn't know what to do. She had even tried praying to Metallia for help, to no avail. Before her, the components of her watch were still being rearranged over and over again, and she hoped that the mystery would keep the Unraveller distracted from her for a while longer. Being forgotten entirely was probably too much to hope for. Suddenly, she felt a gentle tug. It wasn't a physical sensation though, but more of an insistent feeling that urged her to move towards a particular direction. At the same time, she felt a weak trickle of energy flow into her body - only to be drained into the spike still burrowed into her flesh as fast as it arrived. Had Jadeite used the temple despite her wishes? In her current situation, she couldn't quite muster the will to feel anything but grateful about his insubordination.

The Unraveller briefly stopped the motion of her tools. "Backup plan. Loyal minions. Very thorough." Pulses of light briefly moved in the direction of the death god's loud and angry presence. "Could even have worked on Crying Death over there. You will make an excellent servant."

The dark god's filigree manipulators herded tiny bits of metal and floating drops of liquid into a single location. Moving like frantic spider legs, they welded the pieces back into the tiny battery they had once been.

In Ami's opinion, the process should have rendered the little device useless, but when it was placed into the Unraveller's newest mechanism, the cogwheels moved.

"Interaction of certain metals and copper to produce a continuous source of lightning, combined with oscillating crystals. A refined application of well-known principles. Ingenious."

Ami felt the dark god's attention focus on her once more, making her skin tingle.

"Are you ready to answer my questions now?"

Ami kept her mouth shut in defiance.

"Suit yourself." The Unraveller's tools started shifting back into simpler geometric shapes and circled Ami like a flock of vultures. "I do in fact prefer to extract answers not distorted by the inadequacies of language."

"W-what?" Thick strands of blue hair drifted past her face as sharp-edged squares darted in and scraped over her scalp.

"Vivisection of the brain is a superior way to access memories," the Unraveller stated.

Ami's eyes shot open wide as the blades withdrew and grew saw-like teeth. It was going to cut her skull apart! She was out of time!

"There is no reason to panic. I will put everything back together when I am done. Better, even. Make some adjustments and improvements here and there."

"No!" Desperate, Ami did the only thing she could when a buzz-saw like star shape approached her forehead. She triggered the Light's invisibility potion and hoped that the Unraveller wouldn't try brain surgery on a subject she couldn't even see. The holy power surged through her body and toward her skin, and she almost fainted from the nauseating wave of revulsion she felt.

She didn't suffer alone. With a slurping jerk, the crystal spike shot backwards as the Unraveller flinched and let out a startled screech.

With wide eyes, Ami gritted her teeth and used her chance to collect every little scrap of life energy that was trickling in. She couldn't see her hands any longer, but with the flare of brilliant light escaping from her wounds and reflecting off the Unraveller's shiny facets everywhere, the stealth part wasn't working out so well.

The tools closest to her shied away from the glare, their smooth surfaces cracking as they were exposed to the brightness.

"Oh. No." The Unraveller managed to convey resigned disbelief

despite its emotionless voice. "You did not just do that."

The enraged roars of Crowned Death had gone silent. "MIIIIIIIINE!" the death god roared, and his presence started moving. It swooped down from above like a vengeful black sun, wreathed in tongues of dark flame. A sinister pulse of something barely perceptible lashed out, speeding toward the Unraveller.

With the spike gone, it no longer suppressed the pain of Ami's injuries. They hurt, but were only a minor distraction compared to the dread she felt as her nemesis filled the sky. With much less power than she would have wished for, she teleported.

"My schedule. You ruined it," the Unraveller complained. In the blink of an eye, huge blue-streaked triangles swirled outwards, unfolding into umbrella-like rings in front of her.

Ami reappeared, still close enough that she could see the crystalline entity in all of her ever-shifting, fractal glory. Before she could jump again, Crowned Death's attack slammed into the Unraveller's shield and exploded.

A tsunami-like wave of power picked Ami up and shook her around, tossing her head over heels. She gasped and pushed herself out of the path of a skyscraper-sized crystal shard that hurtled past her, spinning around its own axis. A cloud of smaller splinters followed in its wake, but only one got close enough to her that she had to dodge. For a brief instant, she saw a horrifying, flayed bag of semi-transparent flesh and pulsing organs in its surface. Wait, the traces of white light pouring out of it in familiar locations - it was her reflection! The invisibility was wearing off!

The Unraveller's voice crossed the gulf of space, sounding as close as if Ami was still within her clutches. "Do give me a call if you ever change your mind about serving me."

In a fright, the teenager looked back over her shoulder. The dark god was still where she had last seen her, half-engulfed in Crowned Death's amoeba-like flames. Ami's answer was another frantic teleport in the direction she sensed her dungeon heart to be. If only she hadn't fallen so deeply into the dark realm!

"UNRAVELLER, YOUR TREACHERY HAS GONE TOO FAR!"

"Imbecile. What are you attacking me for? If you want her, she's right over there."

Suddenly, the skin on Ami's back felt as if it was ablaze and decaying at the same time. She shook off the phantom sensations caused by the intense hatred focused into Crowned Death's gaze, and her eyes darted left and right as she searched for the exit. Where was her dungeon heart? Was that a tiny pinprick of light ahead?

"MERCURY! You will now pay- GRAH!"

"Oh. Was that something important?" The Unraveller sounded decidedly cheerful."Please, do ignore me again. I don't mind."

Ami felt the gaze of the death god flicker, as if he couldn't decide whom to pay attention to. Not waiting for him to sort out his priorities, she teleported once more. The power calling to her was closer now, and that was definitely her dungeon heart ahead!

Another shockwave from the clash of the deities behind her made her bob like a cork on the waves. Looking back to avoid the hail of debris, she spotted winged shapes rushing towards her against the backdrop of the explosions. With plenty of additional motivation to move faster, she darted ahead, greedily sucking in life energy as she did.

"DIE! YOU ARE GOING TO DIE FOR THIS!"

"I am not the one turning my back to Azzathra. Like you are do- "

A brief blue flash, scattered snowflakes, and Ami dived head-first into the luminous glow before her. As the warmth of the dungeon heart enveloped her like a comforting blanket, she didn't mind one bit that she missed the rest of what the Unraveller had to say.

Last edited: Jul 1, 2016

Rest

Originally on 2012-09-18T18:55:00

The dungeon heart flared like a red miniature sun as Ami dropped out of its orb, and she cried out from sheer joy when she felt the chilly air rush over her bare skin. She had escaped!

Below, at the bottom of the stairs, Cathy raised her arm to shield her eyes against the sudden glare, her hair blasted backwards by the sudden burst of power from the dungeon heart. Squinting past the raised limb, she jumped aside just in time to avoid Snyder, whose voluminous robes caught the gale and dragged him backwards like billowing sails. Behind her, Tiger protested as he crashed into her and dragged them both down into a tangled heap. Cathy ignored them and leaned into the storm instead, pushing herself forward step by step.

Ami grazed her knees when she landed, but that didn't diminish her exhilaration. Panting, she lay on her belly and simply enjoyed the pounding of her heart in her chest - clear proof that she had returned to the world of the living.

The eruption of light from the dungeon heart died down, and a rumbling heartbeat echoed through the chamber, making the ground vibrate. Rapid, metallic footsteps approached as Cathy sprinted up the stairs and squatted down next to Ami.

"You are injured!" the blonde exclaimed, her eyes lingering briefly on Ami's head before travelling down towards the blood trickling from the teenager's right shoulder and forearm. "Snyder, get over here this instant! Merc- Ami! What's wrong? Say something!" Cathy demanded, her voice growing more and more worried. "Talk to me!"

Still catching her breath, Ami pushed herself up into a sitting position, favouring her injured arm. "I'm back," she answered, her voice weak but accompanied by a wide smile.

"I can't help notice that you are missing some things," Jered

commented, averting his gaze from the naked girl as he reached out to help Tiger and Snyder back to their feet.

"Now is not the time," his girlfriend snapped at him. "Injuries first, questions later! Snyder!"

With a rustle of cloth, the acolyte sidled up to the two and examined the bleeding hole underneath Ami's collarbone.

Ami tensed. While fleeing, she had been too busy to pay attention to her wounds. Now that the adrenaline and euphoria were fading away, the burning ache became harder and harder to ignore. She bit her lip, paling. What if the wounds were cursed? The attacks of a dark god had to rank near the top of the list of things that could curse injuries!

"I am going to treat the puncture wound through your forearm first," Snyder said as he gently grabbed her right wrist and lifted the limb. "Does this hurt?"

"It's fine," Ami said softly, blushing a little as his proximity brought her current state of undress more into focus. Not yet used to the layout of her new dungeon, she needed a few seconds to locate a suitably large towel with her Keeper sight. A quick mental yank, and the white cloth wrapped around her. Was Jadeite here too? Worriedly, she looked around. When she didn't spot him, she realised that still had to be on the Avatar Islands. *"Jadeite! I have returned. Thank you!"*

"Welcome back," his telepathic reply echoed in her mind, sounding relieved. *"Are you all right?"*

"A few injuries, but I feel better than last time," Ami told him.

"I'll be back as soon as possible."

"-clean. Since you seem awake and coherent, would you prefer to heal yourself with necromancy instead?" Snyder asked.

Ami blinked. Considering where she just came from, cleansing any potential lingering taint away with Light magic sounded like the much preferable option. "No, please go ahead." She wasn't too confident

about casting complicated spells while untransformed, either, even though being a Keeper meant she shouldn't have any problems.

"Very well. Cathy, Tiger, if you could keep her from struggling, please?" The acolyte's fingertips glowed white as he prepared his healing magic.

Tiger took a seat behind Ami on the ground, wrapping an arm around the smaller girl's waist as she propped her up and let her lean against her. The youma's free hand brushed over Ami's hairless scalp with one finger. "That's a new style for you. Looks like a lot happened while you were away."

"Well, I-" Ami flinched as Snyder's healing magic touched her forearm, but managed to refrain from pulling away. The feeling of revulsion was mild in comparison to her experience with the invisibility potion earlier, and she endured it with clenched teeth.

"Keep breathing normally," Cathy advised, keeping a tight grip on Ami's good arm.

Ami nodded and didn't take her gaze off the blood-smeared wound in her forearm. To her great relief, it shrunk slowly while the white light sank into it, and perfect new skin grew to cover the hole. The Unraveller must have been taking precautions, then. Which made sense if she intended to patch her up later. Why make more work for herself?

"I'll tell you all about it soon," Ami muttered as Snyder moved on to her injured shoulder. "Did anything happen that I need to be aware of? How is everyone doing?" she asked to distract herself from the acolyte's poking and prodding.

"The caravan picked up a bit of an audience when it travelled through the Underworld," Cathy reported. "Unavoidable, really. Nobody tried anything, but the news that you moved a lot of material, troops, and prisoners is going to spread soon."

"How are the - eek!" Ami twitched, her muscles jerking as she fought her flight instinct. Her right elbow struck something soft behind her. "Sorry, Tiger!"

The youma snorted. "You are untransformed, I barely felt that. If there's something you want to feel sorry about, then do so about being too cowardly to explain everything to our friends and family before you left and expecting me to pick up the slack! Do you think I was looking forward to that conversation?"

"I was- well- " Ami hung her head, trailing off. She hadn't wanted to needlessly worry everyone at the time, especially since she was in a hurry, but her adopted sister had a point. What if she had never seen the others or her mother again? She would have never come clean about being Sailor Mercury, for one thing. Her cheeks felt warm, and she tried to put the depressing thoughts aside. "Sorry? In any case, I was about to ask about the civilians."

"Blind and passed out in the barracks," Jered said. When Ami turned to look at him with wide eyes, he shrugged. "Hey, Jadeite had to get that life energy from somewhere. Just look on the bright side. They are too unconscious to be afraid or get into trouble, and none of them went missing during the journey."

"I haven't had time yet to check if all the troops are accounted for, though" Cathy added.

"You expect desertions?" Ami asked, straining to keep still as her flesh crawling from Snyder's healing spells.

"Nah, more like goblins managing to get themselves lost," the blonde elaborated. "I don't think your minions are unhappy with you, corruption issues aside."

"Speaking of which," Jered said, showing the sleeve of his shirt to Ami, "I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but..."

The green fabric in question had tiny holes in it, as if it had spent some time with hungry moths.

Ami glanced at it briefly and shook her head. "That's nothing to worry about. Even with the new dungeon heart, more control over how the corruption manifests in one area still means less control in others. Keeping everything safe required some concessions."

Cathy sighed. "All right, in how much trouble are we?"

"None, really," Ami hurried to assure her. "The effects within the dungeon itself will be harmless, mostly cosmetic, and won't affect any living being. Um, you may want to avoid going outside, though," she added as an afterthought. "I haven't gotten around to bundling the most lethal effects into easily avoided, designated areas yet."

"No problems with that, seeing how we have a grand total of zero exits to the surface." Cathy pointed at Jered's sleeve. "So you are sure this isn't suddenly going to eat holes into our skin instead?"

"Living beings are strictly off-limits," Ami confirmed. "It won't interfere with function or integrity, either. The dungeon isn't going to fall apart or try to kill us again."

"Well, I am glad to hear that," Snyder said as he straightened. "Your wounds are healed to the best of my abilities. I was pleasantly surprised by the lack of complications, but it is my professional opinion that you should get some rest now and take things easy. You did lose a lot of blood."

"Most of which is coating you," Tiger added as she let go of Ami. She looked down at her fingers. "And now us, too. Eww. Take a bath before you rest."

"I wouldn't mind a long soak in a hot tub either," Cathy agreed. "Did you install the hot water already, Ami?"

"No, but I can heat some easily enough." A little fireball into a basin, and it would be indistinguishable from a hot spring.

"Good!" Cathy slung one of Ami's arms over her shoulder and helped her to her feet. "You can tell us all about what happened while we relax!"

Monteraine flapped her wings, startled by the ground groaning and shaking. Her motion kicked up a cloud of volcanic ash, preventing her from getting a good view at the giant, sooty paper cocoon about an arrow's flight away.

The ovoid construct leaned a few degrees sideways, and the constant clanging of dozens of imp picks against rock came to a sudden stop. The sorceress-turned chicken heard panicked squeals, and moments later, a wave of bug-eyed workers sprinted out of the ditch around the formerly-flying dungeon, kicking up dust with each panicked step.

A few of the creatures got tangled in the limp chains strewn around the cocoon, their fearful cries drowned out by the loud grinding noise with which the dungeon slid sideways and deeper, dragging them under.

Monteraine looked away as the displaced air spewed up ash and dust around the construct, concealing it from sight. Not out of respect for the deceased imps, but because she was hoping to get back behind cover before someone spotted her. Morrigan was busy getting his dungeon heart safely underground, but that didn't mean that his imps let any opportunity to torment her pass. She just hoped that he'd realise soon that he had won the battle. If she caught his attention before he had calmed down a bit...

The hen shuddered at the memory of the crimson-eyed imp hopping up and down, howling in fury as it threw a tantrum in front of the dungeon heart. That had been her signal to run. Perhaps she should have kept running? Cautiously, she peered around the stone she was hiding behind, watching the lifeless landscape around her. Smoke and ash rose from red-glowing fissures, opening and closing randomly as earthquakes shook the land.

She made a disappointed clucking noise. All that nasty volcanic stuff in the air would probably dissolve her feathers long before she found a portal that wasn't buried under tons of dirt. She'd have to wait until Morrigan's imps dug one up. Leaning out a bit further, Monteraine turned her head sideways to observe the group of imps claiming a straight path away from the dungeon. The speed at which they were doing so proved to her that they weren't removing prior ownership of the territory. Definite proof that Keeper Mercury had lost here. Morrigan *would* realise that soon enough, too.

The transformed sorceress paused to think. Sure, all the undead minions were gone, but they hadn't cost her Keeper anything in the

first place. No big loss there. Besides, he had accomplished his mission. His prior defeat had been avenged by sending Mercury to Crowned Death and Azzathra, who would certainly reward Morrigan for his success - and keep her from coming back. Monteraine straightened as some of her confidence returned. There was also the prestige of having triumphed over the dark empress! And it was all due to her plan! Perhaps leaving wasn't in her best interest right now?

A shadow fell over the sorceress, interrupting her dreams of being showered with riches and fame. Its maliciously-grinning face alone was half the size of her body, reminding her abruptly that right now, she was still a chicken. Not a completely helpless chicken, though. When the imp raised its foot to kick her, she jumped at its face, batting her wings furiously. She had a sharp beak, and those fist-sized black eyes were inviting targets.

With a startled squeal, the imp backed off and fell on its behind, waving about its pick as it tried to fend off the pecking bird. Eyes clenched shut, it couldn't prevent Clairmonte from using its head as a springboard to launch herself into the air.

Having never learned to fly as a bird, the sorceress couldn't maintain her altitude. She crashed after a few meters, cartwheeling across the ground and leaving a shallow trail in the ash as she skidded to a stop. Choking from the dust she had breathed in, she felt an odd prickling sensation. A wave of nausea made her lose her balance, and then the world started shrinking. When the vertigo passed, she was kneeling in the dirt. Wait, she had knees?

The sorceress jumped to her feet and thrust her hands into the air, a brief laugh escaping from her throat. The transformation had finally worn off! She patted herself down to confirm everything was as it should be, absently adjusting the loosely-connected bands of black fabric that Morrigan passed off as a dress. Now where was that stupid imp? Time for some payback! She whirled around, purple arcs of electricity dancing between her fingers.

She quickly found the target of her ire, upside down and quite a bit higher up than she expected. Blood gushed from its headless neck and into the wide-open mouth of the pale stranger holding the

corpse by its ankles. For an instant, she froze in surprise.

The vampire raised an eyebrow at her and tossed the corpse aside, his red eyes focusing on tastier prey. While he grinned, showing long fangs, dark blurs fell like arrows from the sky behind him and swooped down onto the unsuspecting workers.

The new bathroom smelled of freshly excavated rock. Tiny droplets of water dripped from its ceiling into central basin and sent circular ripples across its surface. They washed over Ami's chin, prompting her to raise her head higher above the water and contemplate how the precipitation reminded her of rain. It even fell from thick clouds of concealing mist that hid the ceiling and protected the privacy of the bath's occupants. They also dimmed the light, but lanterns on slender stands at the four corners of the small pool provided islands of sufficient illumination in the twilight.

Ami still wondered how the violet flames within the glass bowls were floating a few centimetres above the oil they were supposed to be consuming, though. She hadn't used electrical lights so close to the water for safety reasons - not to mention that the dungeon still lacked the necessary infrastructure.

"... but, maybe you should keep it that way?" Cathy joked from the other end of the square pool, barely ten steps away. "I'm sure nobody else has had their hair done by a dark god." The curtains of fog and steam couldn't hide her grin from Ami's supernatural senses. "You'd be the envy of Keepers and cultists alike!"

"Tiger, could you splash her for me, please?" Ami said tiredly and let herself sink deeper into the water, submerging most of her bald head. Her new look was a sore point and something she intended to correct as soon as possible. The thought of being seen like this by someone back home or by Jadeite was mortifying. At the very least, she didn't want to be reminded by her reflection in the mirror about what had nearly happened to her.

"Yeah, the Unraveller really sucks at styling!" Loud splashing noises informed Ami that Tiger was enthusiastically flinging water in Cathy's

direction, laughing.

The silhouette of Cathy's upper body, obscured by the fog, rose in front of one of the lanterns as she fought back, sending water in the youma's direction.

"Anyway, do you know if there are any hair growth spells?" Ami asked in an effort to stop the battle. If it got any more vigorous, the waves would roll over her face, and she'd have to move. She'd prefer not to, really, since the water was making her sleepy.

"Glamour would work, obviously," Tiger said.

"Ask the warlocks?" Cathy suggested. "Though Torian seems to be the only one of them who gives a damn about his appearance."

"Maybe some necromancy, then," Ami pondered. "Hair isn't exactly living material, so - gah!" Water fountained up to her left and right, splashing into her eyes. She choked and blinked at the two imps that had jumped in right next to her.

Grinning, the little workers put a three-fingered hand each on one of Ami's shoulder blades and pushed, apparently responding to her desire to raise her back without having to exert herself.

Ami sat up quickly on her own, gasping. Those hands were cold and felt strange!

The imps giggled at her reaction, and she eyed them suspiciously. Had the mischievous creatures planned this?

"What happened?" Cathy called.

"Imps in the pool," Ami explained, tracking the little creatures as they started dog-paddling in the deeper water. It was odd to see them out of their coveralls, even if the twilight and fog made it hard to make out any details.

"That's it, I'm out of here!" Water sloshed as Tiger climbed out of the basin. "Better change the water, I haven't ever seen those things wash themselves! Hey, maybe that's why they seem to be getting bigger? They accumulate additional layers, like an onion made of

dirt!"

With two angry squeaks, the heads of the imps disappeared underneath the surface, and two trails of bubbles moved fast in the direction of the youma's voice.

Shadows moved through the fog when Cathy stood up and briefly eclipsed one of the lanterns. "I'm getting out too. My skin is starting to look like a prune. What do you want me to do for the moment?"

"Keep the peace between the soldiers and the civilians," Ami decided after a moment. "We don't have enough room here yet to keep them as segregated as before," she continued, "and I'm worried about them having to interact with each other."

"I'll put the fear of you into our soldiers," Cathy said. "They'll behave themselves. So will the civilians, at least until Jadeite restores their sight."

Ami sighed. "They'll be scared and angry. I hope nobody will start anything." If there were riots, the situation could turn bloody very quickly. She had better get started with expanding this site as soon as possible. There simply wasn't enough living space for everyone in a hastily remodelled mine. Which reminded her of another problem. "We must re-establish diplomatic contact with the dwarfs. I want to resolve this situation peacefully, if at all possible."

"Don't these lands belong to the kingdom that didn't want anything to do with you?" Tiger asked as she towelled herself off.

"Yes, but I've still got to try! It would be better for everyone if they would just let me buy this land." Most of Ami's gold and gems remained untouched in the transport crates, ready to be used to expand the dungeon. She'd gladly spend it to prevent unnecessary conflict.

"Well, I'm glad this is Jered's problem and not mine," the youma said, shrugging. A moment later, she screeched in outrage when the two imps jumped out of the mist and emptied a bucket of water over her head. "You vile little shits! I was just dry! Get back here!" She took off after the little creatures as they faded back into the fog.

Ami closed her eyes and tried to return to enjoying her bath. Transforming back into Sailor Mercury had already cleaned her body, but the hot water helped her unwind from all the stress. Despite the screams and the gleeful giggles, she felt as if she could fall asleep any moment now.

"Hey! What the- Mercury!" Cathy's alarmed shout came from the antechamber. "Didn't you say the corruption wouldn't destroy things?"

Last edited: Jul 13, 2016

Unwelcome Surprises

Originally on 2012-10-03T20:12:00

With closed eyes, Mukrezar swayed through the empty room, turning left and right with no discernible pattern. His motions resembled an awkward dance to inaudible music, and sometimes he waved his arms to touch things only he could see.

"Your Druggedness, the high priest wishes to talk to you," his butler interrupted him, his voice echoing off the meticulously smoothed walls.

Mukrezar's eyelids opened to reveal two red-glowing slits. "My hallucinations are the result of very precise and sophisticated magic and not lowly drugs."

"If you say so, Master." The bearded imp tilted his head to the side. "That is a lot of effort for an effect that can be achieved by chewing on a few mushrooms."

"A mere fungus would not allow me to process and react to valuable strategic information in the secure privacy of my own head. Say, why aren't you supervising your goblin Keeper?"

"He is still making a very spirited effort to turn the approximate shape of a bile demon, Master. I am eagerly awaiting the day his gluttony catches up with him. Death can only improve his smell. If I may remind you," the suit-wearing imp rolled his eyes toward the ceiling, "the high priest is still waiting for you."

"Ah, yes, him. Well, I guess I should check what he has to say." Mukrezar stripped the eight rings he was wearing from his fingers and dropped them into a golden bowl. He disappeared from the empty chamber, reappearing above a leather armchair in his throne room. The decorative dragon wings jutting from its sides rustled as he dropped into the cushioned seat. With a snip of his fingers, the coal-filled braziers to his left and right lit up, and a huge roll of red fabric rolled down the wall as it unfurled into a banner. Satisfied with

the ambience, he summoned the active crystal ball into his presence, letting it bob up and down in the air before him.

"Mukrezar."

The elf's eyes widened into an exaggerated expression of surprise. "High priest!" he interrupted the jewel-studded skull. "I am amazed to see you! I was expecting your successor by now!"

The skeletal figure was quiet for a moment, taking time to select its words. "Our Lord has given me instructions concerning your request," it said, sounding as if every word pained him.

"Oh, what prompted this? No, wait, let me guess." Mukrezar rested his chin on his hands. "You tried to attack the Empress and she set you all on fire again, didn't she?"

"No. No, she did not!" the high priest disagreed.

"But everyone's still dead - well, deader - and Crowned Death is pissed at you?"

The high priest somehow managed to glare at Mukrezar without eyes or a face. Almost inaudibly, he muttered "Yes."

"And that's why you leave this kind of thing to the professionals," Mukrezar said, his smug grin threatening to split his face in two.

"Anyway, I shall be arriving shortly with the troops you begged me for." There was no emotion in the skeleton's voice, but its staff cracked as if it was being gripped too hard.

"And it only took utter disaster to make you see reason."

"We drove her off the Avatar Islands! She ran from us! Retreated!" The skeleton roared and swept its arm to the left, as if wiping everything off an imaginary table.

Mukrezar hesitated. "Really? Are you she didn't just leave on her own? *I* certainly wanted to get away from that place, too," Mukrezar mocked.

Through gritted teeth, the high priest said "Find her. Adjust your vaunted plan accordingly. Oh," his voice suddenly became almost cheerful, "and our Lord insists that you take her alive! Have fun with that!"

The image in the crystal ball extinguished itself, cutting off the skeleton's hollow laughter.

Mukrezar leaned back, resting his head on his hands. "Alive?" He said tentatively, as if testing the word. "The Light gods have a similar standing order for her. Interesting."

Soap-smelling steam crept into the small changing room through the open doorway and pooled around the legs of the two towel-wrapped girls inside. Both of them were looking at the stone ledge along one wall that served both as bench and as table.

"W-well, it looks worse than it is, Cathy," Ami said, hiding her mouth behind one hand. "Technically, it's still functional." Why couldn't this particular complication have gone away along with the lethal corruption?

"Functional? You call this functional?" Wrapped in a towel, Cathy picked up the shredded remains of her Sailor Mercury uniform and waved them around like a flag. The last remaining piece of the skirt tore off the tattered garment and fluttered to the ground.

"It still covers all the important parts," Ami pointed out, her cheeks flushed mildly as she inspected what was left of the uniform. The frayed sailor collar was the largest remaining piece of continuous fabric.

"So does underwear, but you wouldn't wear that in public!"

"Wear what?" Tiger strode into the room, her towel fashioned into an improvised bag she had slung over her shoulder. "Oh! Neat!" She dropped her squirming burden, eliciting two pained groans from it as it hit the floor.

Alarmed, Ami squatted down when two dazed looking imps crawled

out from the dropped towel and checked them for injuries.

Meanwhile, Tiger snatched the net-like collection of loosely connected holes from Cathy's hand. "Hmm, a bit tight around the chest," the orange-skinned youma commented as she wiggled into the outfit, which earned her a glare from Cathy. Tiger turned and twisted, admiring her reflection in a section of the wall that resembled smooth ice. "Not too bad."

"Maybe if you like the barbarian-in-rags look," Cathy said, "I, however, don't want to make people think I'm looting ancient tombs for my wardrobe! Besides, there are still pieces flaking off!"

Ami finished healing the bumps on the heads of the imps. Satisfied that Tiger hadn't seriously harmed them, she ordered them to fetch their clothes and join the rest of the workforce. When she looked up and caught sight of her adopted sister, she reflexively covered her eyes with her hands and peered through the fingers. "Um, Tiger, do you realise that it's really hard to tell where the black of the outfit ends and your stripes begin?"

"Amazing, isn't it? Oh, stop looking at me like that. We have skimpier swimwear back home!"

"Because modesty is so greatly valued in the Underworlds," Cathy remarked.

"I was talking about Tokyo, actually," Tiger elaborated.

The blonde looked at Ami, raising an eyebrow. "I don't think I want to know. Anyway, you can't tell me those scraps," she pointed one finger at Tiger's chest, "are still functional. You'd freeze to death wearing that!"

The youma shrugged. "It's hot enough in here right now. Besides, have you considered the starting material? That senshi uniform clearly prioritises looking attractive over everything else!"

"And you think simply showing more skin is the best way to optimize attractiveness? That's crude and- " Cathy burrowed her face in her palm. "Actually, that's *exactly* what I'd expect from the dark gods,"

she finished, grimacing. "Mercury?"

Ami scratched her head. "Well, it's not impossible that the corruption effects take the environment into account. When faced with mutually exclusive options, they may preserve only the non-redundant ones." Her shoulders slumped. "Of course, considering what we are talking about here, it's more likely that they are simply picking the path of most destruction."

The swordswoman crossed her arms. "I don't like a best case scenario in which my clothes fall apart whenever I enter a warm room. Why is it going after clothes, anyway?"

"It's not," Ami explained, "but the senshi uniform is conjured and therefore has less resistance to the changes than real matter, meaning-"

"Wait, wait, back up a moment. Less resistance? So everything else around," Cathy spread her arms and turned in a circle "is going to change too, eventually?"

"Sorry, but I didn't have a lot of time or wiggle room when I redesigned the dungeon heart," Ami defended herself. "It was either this or death!" To be fair, she hadn't expected this exact effect. Still, some embarrassment was infinitely preferable to whatever the dark gods would have done to her.

"Great." Cathy threw her hands up in disgust. "Guess I'll be wearing armour from now on."

Ami was getting a little irritated. Yes, this had the potential to get inconvenient and annoying, but the alternative had been much worse. Besides, it wasn't as if she didn't have ideas to deal with it already. "Look, there is a very simple way to avoid unwanted changes. If something already incorporates the corruption's preferred aesthetics, then it won't be modified." Much.

Cathy considered this for a moment. "So what you are saying is that my gear needs to be all black and spiky and covered in skulls to stay all right?"

Ami nodded. "While that's not accurate on the details, you got the gist of it."

"Eh, I suppose I can live with that."

"What are the correct aesthetics, then?" Tiger asked, tearing her gaze from her mirror image.

"I, um, don't actually know that yet," Ami admitted. Prudence suggested that she should fill this gap in her knowledge before she started more complex projects. "We'll have to wait and see, I think."

"So, conjured stuff suffers faster," Cathy pondered, switching the topic. "I wonder what the reaper armour would end up like. Actually, hmm." Her face suddenly brightened."Oh well, might as well make the best out of the situation." With two quick steps, she was at Tiger's side, grabbed her arm, and pulled her closer. "Listen up, I have an idea, but it needs some preparation!"

The youma blinked, but her confused expression was slowly replaced by a grin as Cathy rapidly whispered into her ear. Her eyes darted over to Ami with a calculating look.

This did not bode well, the young Keeper thought.

A dozen imps filled the air with the clanging of picks against rock as they excavated a new room. Stirred up by the construction work, dust swirled through the air and into the adjacent corridor, where it settled as a white coating on the sarcophagi and bone-like decorations.

The wafting clouds parted, making room for vertical streaks of blackness that converged into two figures pressed close against each other. The smaller one wasted no time pushing the larger away.

"We are back, so let go of me already!" Camilla slipped out of the arm Jadeite had looped around her waist and took to the air, pouting.

The dark general rolled his eyes, unconcerned with the ambassador's mood. He had been successful - twice - and that was what counted. A quick glance at the crypt-like ambience told him that he was in a part of the conquered dungeon that had yet to be remodelled. Unfortunately, he didn't know where he should go - why memorise the dungeon's layout when Mercury was busy rebuilding the place anyway? Still, that was a problem that was easily fixed.

Camilla followed him just out of arms reach, her angry wing beat whipping dust into his hair. She had to be doing that on purpose.

He approached one of the imps from the side, taking care to stay out of the path of its swinging pick, and prodded the creature with the tip of his boot. "You. Lead me to the Empress," he ordered when the startled imp looked up at him.

"Why do you keep following me?" Jadeite asked when the persistent hum of fairy wings kept hounding him.

"Because I'm not about to wander randomly through a dungeon on my own," the fairy snapped.

The imp lead them through wide corridors with freshly-hewn, undecorated walls. Finally, the tiny worker tugged on Jadeite's trouser leg, pointed at a closed door, and rushed off the way they had come.

"...stop obsessing over this and go to bed," he heard Tiger's voice from inside.

"Can't, too much work," Mercury replied.

He knocked against the door, whose blank wood was starting to ripple in odd places. "Your Majesty? I have returned," he said confidently.

"Jadeite?" Mercury sounded surprised, but happy. "Eep! One moment please! Don't come in!"

That wasn't quite the reaction Jadeite had expected for his

triumphant return.

Inside, Mercury added in a harried voice. "Tiger, quickly!"

"Uh uh. You are being silly. Just deal with it, sheesh. Or try a hat." The amusement in the youma's voice coming from the room indicated that there was nothing dangerous going on, to the dark general's relief.

"Tiger!"

He heard a giggle, followed a crumbling noise and lots of small stones pattering to the floor. The youma must have just teleported away. Quick footsteps within the chamber hurried this way and that way with no clear destination in mind.

Camilla turned to look at him, combining a frown with a smug grin. "Barely back and already hiding things from you," she whispered, her arms crossed over her chest.

All things considered, Jadeite liked her better when she was still fawning over him. "Empress? Is everything all right?" he asked, deciding to ignore the irritating fairy.

"Yes, yes, I'm fine! You can come in now!"

The door opened inwards, creaking softly as it revealed a well-lit chamber. Schematics and maps covered the walls instead of wallpaper and rustled when Jadeite took a step inside.

He almost didn't recognise Mercury when she stepped around the paper-laden central table and approached him with quick steps. Not only was she possessing an ice golem, but the wide-brimmed wizards hat she was wearing concealed the upper half of her face with shadows while her high-collared cloak hid most of the rest. Between the two, only the huge smile on the lower part of her face remained visible.

Jadeite blinked. If he had to guess at the purpose of the cloak, he'd say that Mercury didn't find the ice armour of her golems modest enough. He had no explanation for why she had apparently stolen a warlock's hat, though.

"Welcome back, Jadeite! Thank you so much for getting me out of there!" Mercury said. When she spotted the fairy behind him, her steps faltered, and the smile on her face became more reserved. "Ambassador. Greetings to you too," she said, inclining her head.

For some reason, Jadeite felt mildly disappointed when she stopped. It wasn't as if she was going to throw herself into his arms and kiss him again like the last time he had made her overjoyed. Besides, with those icy lips... Anyway, stupid fairy. He bowed, one arm held across his chest. "I apologise for the delay in returning here. I took the liberty to remove the remaining invaders from your realm with the aid of your vampires," he explained.

"Oh. Good," Mercury said after a moment. "Did you run into any trouble?"

"Aside from imps, the enemy only had one minion left. She managed to turn two vampires into stone before I knocked her out, though. The others are dragging her back here as we speak."

Mercury swivelled to the right and grabbed one of the numbered plans from the table. "I'll have to add a prison cell, here, close to the portal," the teenage Keeper commented absently.

Jadeite glanced around. Most of the papers seemed to show a mountain from several angles, with an anthill-like thicket of rooms and tunnels filling its upper third.

Camilla cleared her throat.

"Yes, Ambassador?" The red eyes glowing in the shadows underneath the hat fixated on the blonde fairy.

"I'd like to lodge a formal complaint!" Camilla put her hands on her hips and almost managed to keep her voice steady. "Your subordinate," she pointed at Jadeite, "abducted me and forced me to participate in a dark ritual!"

Jadeite stared at the spiteful little fairy, taken off-guard. Try to ruin his moment of triumph, did she?

Now it was Mercury's turn to blink. Her crimson eyes sought out

Jadeite's, begging for an explanation.

"I convinced her to assist with channelling power to you. The chances of getting you back were higher with her aid," the dark general said. "I may have brought her to the Avatar Islands and implied some things, but didn't threaten or coerce her in any way."

"You've got to be kidding me! That was outright blackmail!" Camilla protested.

Mercury clasped her hands, her gaze moving from Camilla to Jadeite and back several times. Finally, it settled on the fairy. "I- well, you have my deepest apologies for his actions," she said, bowing. "It, um, would help if I knew what exactly happened."

"He just grabbed me and-"

"I accompanied-"

Jadeite and Camilla stopped in mid-sentence to glare at each other.

"After-"

"I-"

"I will listen to the Ambassador's accusations first," Mercury broke the deadlock, adding an apologetic look in Jadeite's direction.

"He just appeared out of nowhere and grabbed me from behind, and then we were in that creepy Oracle tower back on the Avatar Islands," Camilla began. "No word of warning or a request for me to come along," she continued indignantly. "Just bam- abduction!"

Jadeite shrugged. Did that ambassador really think she would achieve anything aside from annoying him when he was currently so highly in Mercury's favour? It was clear she was no trained diplomat. "There was no time to lose."

"You don't know how right you are," Mercury muttered, shuddering.

Jadeite felt a moment of concern, but Camilla's expression becoming more worried distracted him.

When the fairy continued, her voice was shriller than before. "He dragged me off to a sinister location I can't possibly survive in on my own, surrounded me with vampires, and told me he'd kill all your captives if I didn't help him! For a moment, I even thought he was planning to use *me* as a sacrifice!"

Mercury gasped. "Jadeite?"

"That is not at all what I said, your Majesty. I simply told her that the life force I was using might run out before you came back if she didn't help. Of course, since I only brought what I had already taken from the civilians - which obviously didn't kill them - she was jumping to conclusions." Mercury looked happy to hear that, so he wasn't going to tell her that he had been prepared to tell a youma to get more, if necessary.

"You utter bastard!" Camilla tensed as if she was about to hit him. "You tricked me! You..." She clenched her fists and took a few deep breaths. More collected, she faced Mercury. "Anyway, kidnapping me was still an inexcusable assault on a dignitary of the Shining Concord Empire! My superiors will be outraged by this insult! There will be consequences!"

Mercury winced. "Please don't tell them!" she blurted out. "My diplomatic situation is enough of a nightmare already after this emergency relocation. I'll be trying to smooth things over, but if people start believing that their diplomatic personnel isn't safe with me... "

"Well, perhaps your underling there should have thought of that before he kidnapped me," Camilla snapped, putting her arms akimbo. "It is my duty as ambassador to-"

"You never were in any danger," Jadeite pointed out. Something about the fairy's behaviour felt off. Even if she was angry, she should be too scared of Mercury and him to be so confrontational. It didn't make much sense. In his experience, only youma with their back to the wall would dare- of course. "Ah, now I see. You are trying to wring out concessions from her Majesty before your superiors hear of this!"

Mercury's eyes widened in surprise, and Camilla whirled to face him.

"What? That's preposterous! Why would I-"

"You need something to reassure them of your loyalty, or at least your competence," Jadeite pointed out. "First, you joined the service of her Majesty-"

"I didn't want to!"

"-then, she requested for you to be placed as ambassador, and now you helped bring her back from the dark realm. It will all add up in their minds."

"I did it to save all those innocent people!" Camilla shouted, her face reddened with anger. "They can't fault me for that, right? They can't!"

Mercury took a step forward and put a frozen hand on the other girl's shoulder. "I'm sure we can find a solution that works out for everyone," she said in a gentle voice.

Jadeite scowled in disapproval. How typical of her to be moved by the glitter of tears in the corners of the fae's eyes. "Well, she *did* save the civilians," he spoke up, drawing surprised looks from both of the girls. "Without Empress Mercury to care for them, they would not have survived for long."

Camilla hung her head. "They'd just point out that the Empress is simply keeping them alive to sacrifice them later, anyway."

The young Keeper's eyes flashed. "That's what you think of me?"

"But-" the fairy's eyes widened in alarm when a hand made of ice grabbed her around the wrist.

With surprising strength, Mercury dragged Camilla toward one of the walls and gestured at the plans covering it. "Look! Look at those blueprints! Do you have any idea of the logistics and costs involved in properly caring for eight thousand individuals?" She waved at the sketch of a square room, broken up with pillars. "That's a dining hall with seats for about five hundred people. I need several of those just

to feed everyone in a timely manner!"

To Jadeite, the design looked much like she had copied a self-service restaurant with multiple counters, although without cashiers.

"They also need water for proper hygiene, which means aqueducts and sewers, not to mention pumping it up or melting ice," Mercury continued as she showed another series of pictures to Camilla. Some of them showed a labyrinthine network of pipes, while another seemed to be a new waterfall painted onto the flank of the mountain. "Bathrooms, pools, fountains." Mercury pointed at a different row of drawings with each word.

The fairy followed her around, her eyes glazing over from seeing so many complicated blueprints in quick succession.

"Housing. Heating. Farms. Streets and corridors to easily move between all of those locations. Space for leisure or trade." Mercury let go of the fairy, hesitating for a moment when she noticed the dazed expression on the blonde's face. "Look, the point is that keeping them alive, healthy, and happy involves much more effort than simply keeping them alive. Why would I go through the effort of building all this for them," she spread her arms, indicating the blueprints surrounding them, "if I wanted to use them as sacrifices? Why not just throw them into a hole instead and toss them some food as needed? And why give them back their sight? Think about it!"

A little slack-jawed, Camilla nodded tentatively, shrinking away from Mercury's intense stare.

After a moment, the red-eyed girl straightened and coughed into her fist. "Um, sorry about the rant, but I am getting a little frustrated about everything," she said, sounding embarrassed. "Please, take some time to consider my words, and perhaps discuss things with your sisters before you decide on doing anything rash." She raised her head. "Jadeite! Let's get started with waking the civilians in the meantime!"

Last edited: Jul 1, 2016

Valuable Art

Originally on 2012-10-20T00:00:00

Ami had created the small room as a library and removed the bookshelves, leaving her with a brightly-lit chamber well suited for scholarly pursuits. After four desks across the footstep-muffling carpet to the centre of the room, covering them with a tablecloth, and hiding the uglier alcoves with wall drapes, it also served as an adequate place for conducting diplomacy.

Sitting across from her at the table, Jered talked into a black-painted crystal ball. "I think your reservations are baseless. Her Imperial Majesty is not requesting to purchase weapons, tools, or even knowledge from you. The other dwarven holds can hardly object to you selling us *art*."

Ami nodded along with his words, even though she knew she couldn't be seen through the layer of paint covering the orb. She heard a chair move, followed shortly by a door closing, and waited patiently for the go-between to relay the message to his liege. Just because the dwarfs of Sirith Anlur were willing to trade with her didn't mean that they weren't paranoid about it.

She really hoped they would accept this deal, even if it wasn't about a crown. Having mutually beneficial trade relations with one of the dwarven groups might just keep the others from attacking at once when they learned about her dungeon. Diplomacy aside, Ami was eager to see how professional dwarven artisans would work around the dungeon's corruption. Her smile fell a little when she remembered what exactly they'd have to work with. Given the constraints, their masterful craftsmanship would be necessary to avoid complete disaster.

Unexpected movement in one corner of the room startled her from her thoughts, and she turned just in time to see Tiger step out of a teleport, surrounded by a cloud of dust. Quickly, she raised a finger to her lips and met the youma's eyes, shaking her head.

Tiger nodded, grinning like a madwoman, and sneaked towards the door. Behind it, she found Cathy sitting in full armour at a desk, chewing on a pen and scowling at her paperwork.

The blonde's expression brightened when the youma gave her a thumbs up, and she waved for her to come closer.

As the door closed, Ami briefly wondered that the two were up to and if it had something to do with the camera dangling from her sister's neck.

Footsteps approached, and a male dwarf said "Lord Jered? Could you please specify the theme that the commissioned designs must incorporate?"

"There are three, actually," Ami spoke up. She heard the dwarf on the other end of the connection suck in a sharp breath. "One can be dominant, but there have to be at least traces of the others present, too." Unfortunately.

"Please elaborate, your Imperial Majesty?" The messenger sounded young or intimidated, and possibly both.

"The first theme is fairly straightforward. Water and ice. Frost flowers, bluish colours, clear or mirrored surfaces, that kind of thing." Ami felt confident that the theme represented her own powers. The origin of the second had stumped her for much longer.

"Understood, your Imperial Majesty."

"The next theme is a little more complicated, as it doesn't seem very unified. I have come to the conclusion that it simply opposes the dark god Azzathra." Apparently, her tweaks to deflect hostile influences in the corruption had caught whatever he had been doing along with Crowned Death's efforts. She hadn't even known he had been involved, which had made identifying the resulting aesthetics tricky.

"I - am sorry to say that I do not quite follow, Empress?"

"He promotes strength and abhors magic," Ami elaborated. "Therefore, fragility and magic would make sense and fit the

observed manifestations. Among them are filigree structures, arcane symbols, and crystals."

"Ah. That sounds as if it would allow our artist a certain degree of freedom." A feather scratched over parchment. "And the last theme, your Imperial Majesty?"

"Well, um-" Ami began, glad that the messenger couldn't see her face. She coughed. "That is - I think it would be easier to show you. I have a chamber with a good number of examples. I shall set up a second crystal ball there and remain in this room, if that is agreeable?"

Hushed whispers came from the covered scrying device. "Very well," the go-between said finally, sounding uncertain.

Ami wondered why the dwarfs were so afraid of seeing her directly. She put the question aside for the moment and moved her Keeper sight to a small labyrinth made of upright stone plates. Getting a sufficient amount of samples to determine her dungeon's themes had been simple in the end. She had taken one empty chamber, filled it with standing rock slabs, and added a horde of imps. Under instructions that no two slabs should share the same motive, the imps had quickly fortified everything. The resulting engravings had been diverse as well as instructive.

Averting her gaze, Ami transported a crystal ball to the centre of the art gallery. "All right, it's ready." Immediately, she heard a choking noise, probably from the wizard handling the dwarf's crystal ball.

"By Urmak's anvil!" the messenger exclaimed at the same time. "That's- I'm not sure-"

"I can't help it that the theme most opposed to a death god is fertility! Or that the corruption is putting its own spin on it!" Ami shouted, her cheeks feeling as if they were on fire.

"Ah, quite, your Majesty," the dwarf said, gulping.

"Just - aim for something classy, *please!*" Ami blurted out. Privately, she was willing to settle for something that wouldn't get her arrested

on indecency charges. "I'll do what I can to shift the manifestations more towards plants."

"Do try to minimise the occurrence of mushrooms, though," Jered added.

"I don't see any mush- oh. Yes. Well, I shall report this to my liege, but I have no doubt that our craftsmen would be able to handle this *highly unusual* challenge."

Ami could feel the heat radiating from her face. "Good. Jered will work out the financial details of the transaction with you." She stood and nodded at the wavy-haired man before fleeing the embarrassing conversation.

In the office next door, she stumbled upon Tiger and Cathy. The former sat on the blonde's desk, holding rectangles that looked suspiciously like photos.

Cathy slapped her leg, making the armour ring. "... his face! Hah! And the fairies!"

"That was a stroke of good luck," Tiger agreed, sniggering.

"What exactly are you two doing?" Ami asked, narrowing her eyes at the images as she got closer.

"Oh, Cathy here tipped me off about who here wears conjured clothes aside from you. I just had to wait for the right moment, and-"

The door to the corridor flew open and banged against the wall. "Where is she?" Jadeite, wild-eyed and clad in a pristine new uniform, blocked the doorway.

"Eeep!" With a quick leap, Tiger rolled off the table and into cover behind Ami.

Scowling, the dark general snapped his fingers, causing every photograph in the room to burst into flame.

"My reports!" Cathy screamed as the smell of burnt paper rose from her desk. Thinking quickly, she threw herself on the tiny fires,

quenching them.

"Mercury. Your sister needs to be disciplined," Jadeite stated, dark power crackling around him as he stared at the youma.

"Protect me, little sister!" Tiger said, holding Ami like a shield. She leaned down and whispered into the younger girl's ear "I can make copies for you!"

Ami froze for a moment as her mind speculated on what those images could have shown. Darn it, she had just stopped blushing! "No fighting," she declared. "Jadeite, stand down. Tiger, hand over that camera."

"Spoilsport." Tiger pouted and tossed the offending object to Jadeite.

A bolt of blackness from the curly-haired blonde reduced the object to tiny pieces in mid-flight. Clay shards clattered to the floor as the glamour on them faded.

"Tiger, that was a mean prank. Cathy, shame on you for encouraging her," Ami scolded the older girls.

"Sorry, I thought we all could use a good laugh after all that has happened," the swordswoman said. Seeing Ami's unamused expression, she continued "Seriously, it's not as if someone was hurt. In fact, consider it a preview of what will happen to everyone if you don't get the corruption thing managed. How did your negotiations about that go, anyway?" she blatantly changed the topic.

"I think the dwarfs will accept the deal. I was afraid they'd just abort the talks when I got to the part about *that* theme, though."

"Understandable," Cathy nodded.

Ami caught Jadeite staring intently at a spot on her forehead. "Jadeite? Is something wrong?" She asked, suddenly feeling very self-conscious.

"Well, it it looks as if your hair is starting to go grey," the dark

general said.

Ami twitched. "What?" Wait, she was wearing a conjured wig. Corruption, then. "That must be ash from earlier!" she blurted out. Judging from his sceptical expression, he didn't quite believe her.

"Sooo," Tiger ended the awkward silence, "we'll have exciting new fashion designed by dwarven master tailors soon? Compliant with the three newest trends in dungeon aesthetics?"

"It's very likely," Ami agreed, not entirely sure where the youma was going with this. Her grin promised imminent discomfort.

"Good. So only one important question remains!" Tiger put her hands on Ami's shoulders and gently pushed her toward the dark general. "Jadeite, which of the three available corruption styles would you prefer her new clothes to favour? Transparent, lingerie, or barely there?"

"TIGER!"

A knight wearing a dented and scraped suit of full plate leaned against one of the hall's many pillars, chipping away at the floor tiles as he tapped his armoured foot. He had kept his gear in great shape when compared to that of the dozens of similar figures around him. His ancient armour even retained a few patches of its coat of black paint and didn't squeak at all when he jumped to the side.

A skeletal, clawed foot bigger than his torso slammed down on the spot where he had just been standing. It swivelled, grinding stone underneath its weight as a hind leg twice as tall as the knight repositioned itself.

Leaning back, the warrior flipped open his visor and spat a curse in the direction of the distant, horned skull at the end of the creature's arching spine.

The dragon skeleton continued to ignore his existence, or perhaps its head was simply too far away to hear him over the general chatter. Crouching so it didn't bump into the ceiling, it took another

step forward and joined the animated discussion between a bandage-wrapped mummy and a skeleton in faded warlock robes.

Pursing parchment-like lips, the undead knight turned away and searched for a path that would get him closer to the front of the dense crowd. He knew better than to take a short-cut through the only empty space among the forest of pillars. The priests of Crowned Death, thirteen black-robed figures cordoning off an area around the high priest himself, would punish such disrespect.

He focused on the beetle-like throne that towered above the masses, walking around on six spindly bone legs. On it, the high priest himself lounged like a decadent monarch, wrapped in six layers of gold-trimmed black cloth. His mask of rubies and amber scowled and glittered coldly as he pointed his empty eye-sockets at the balcony high up the closest wall.

The air carried a faint trace of rot and ancient dust as Mukrezar stepped up to the balcony's railing and addressed the ghostly illusion floating before him. "High priest. Are your underlings done with applying the protective spells?"

"Yes, they have finished layering their wards over your own." The projection crossed its arms. "Were this any other opponent, I would consider your precautions paranoid."

"Yes, you have mentioned that before." Mukrezar looked right through the transparent image, narrowing his eyes at the distant real body of the priest below. "So, are you satisfied with the preparations?"

"There should be no way for anyone to spy on us," the high priest acknowledged grudgingly.

"Good!" Mukrezar clapped his hands, making his wide, gold-embroidered sleeves sway from the motion. "Then it is time to finally get started!"

Trumpets sounded and banners unrolled from the edge of his

balcony, reaching almost to the floor. Between the proudly-displayed white reaper heads on red cloth, a portcullis screeched as it withdrew into the ceiling.

"Quiet!" Mukrezar raised his hands, his amplified voice rolling like thunder over his audience. When all empty eye-sockets and milky, decayed orbs focused on him, he continued "The moment you have all been waiting for approaches! It is time for me to reveal my grand plan!"

The hall fell silent, letting his words echo.

"High priest, why don't you lead the congregation in prayer while my imps bring in one of the vital components? I'm sure Crowned Death is as eager to get the details as all of you are."

The high priest nodded, and the thirteen priests surrounding him raised their bone staves as he started chanting in a long-dead language.

All around them, the various undead sank to their knees, pressed their foreheads to the ground, and joined in the prayer. Meanwhile, imps emerged from the portcullis, chained to a wheeled platform carrying a large cube.

Mukrezar smirked as it advanced through the ranks of bowed backs, their owners unable to look up and satisfy their curiosity. The box's intricate golden leaf pattern and strong magical aura screamed "ancient magical artefact of elven make" to those in the know.

The death priests, still standing, simply watched it approach as they continued their prayers. Soon enough, an oppressive presence weighted down on the chamber. The feeling was fainter than in a temple, but unmistakable.

"Lord Crowned Death," Mukrezar said, bowing his head. "Welcome! Thank you for gracing us humble beings with your attention!" He straightened. "Now, without further ado - a little speech!"

His audience groaned, more so than was typical for the undead.

The pink-haired elf pointed at his chest with his thumb and grinned.

"Evil, remember?"

Dead faces failed to reflect any kind of amusement.

"Tough crowd. Oh well." He cleared his throat. "I guess I can let a small detail about my plan slip already to whet your appetite," he said. "You'll be happy to learn that I'd be extremely surprised if it led to any of you being set on fire!"

A faint murmur of approval echoed through the hall, though the presence of the death god began to radiate annoyance, tinged with barely-controlled anger.

Mukrezar wisely decided to hurry up. "Servants of Crowned Death! You may be wondering why I asked for you specifically. That's simple: you are his best and his brightest! Not only are you vastly more powerful individually than the shambling hordes; more importantly, you are also smarter. Much smarter. You can follow complex instructions without supervision. You have the ability to effectively use magic. Surprises? They won't leave you stumped. Where other undead blindly follow orders, you can think on your feet, evaluate the situation, take the initiative and make decisions! Strategy and tactics are not beyond you. All of you are, dare I say it," Mukrezar swept his pointed index finger over the group, "qualified to lead. "And that," Mukrezar raised both hands theatrically, "that is why I wanted, no, needed you all here! That is why I need you all- "

Every single support pillar in the hall exploded outwards, and speeding rock shards scythed down the crowd. Domes of blue and purple lights flashed briefly where the rocks shattered against magical protections, while a thunderstorm of glowing lines flickered across every surface as wards overloaded and discharged. An instant later, the ceiling slammed down on the carnage, shaking the ground with its deafening impact.

Up on the balcony, the dusty blast of displaced air tossed Mukrezar against the wall.

Coughing, he climbed back to his feet and brushed the dirt from his robes. "- need you all to disappear." He peered over the railing at

the massive column of rock and debris that had replaced the room. "Yes, exactly like that. Thank you very much for your cooperation." His mouth curved upwards as he addressed the stunned outrage and searing fury emanating from the general location of the debris. "By the way, I quit."

The death god's fury turned into bloody-minded murderous intent.

Mukrezar put his hands on his head and cowered. "Oh dear, you want me dead. Woe is me! I shall be spending the brief remainder of my days in mortal terror, always looking over my shoulder and hiding from your cult!" He turned his head and glanced at the pile of rocks. "Except I just decapitated it. Whoops. Well, never mind then. Guess I'm just going to mock you instead. Ahem." He waved his hands as if scaring a bunch of chickens. "Shoo, go away. Don't you have more failures to oversee? I'm not afraid of a dark god with no minions to do his bidding!"

With the priests' chanting interrupted, Crowned Death's presence started to fade, but his searing hatred didn't. He must have been compensating for the poorer transmission with an increase in intensity.

"So, you probably want to know why I did it. Did I wish to avoid conflict with Mercury? Did I resent being ordered around? Did your enemies bribe me enough? Did another dark god offer me a better deal? Or did I find out about what happened fifteen years ago?"

He paused for effect. "All of those, actually. Still, that's not the *important* reason."

A hint of curiosity briefly flickered through the death god's loathing.

"My true motive, of course, is pride!" the elf stated, beaming. "I had to remind the world that I am still the greatest Keeper, so I needed to one-up Empress Mercury. *She* merely ruined your master plan. Me? I wiped out your influence in this world on a whim!" Mukrezar thrust a fist in the air. "Today, your cult. Soon, the Avatar!"

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A Hairy Situation

Originally on 2012-12-01T00:08:00

Disguised with her hat and cloak, Ami slowly walked through the cluttered passage between towering bookshelves. To her left, four goblins squealed as they wobbled on a ladder and passed books upwards from hand to hand.

"No, the *top* left, you illiterate morons!" a red-faced warlock shouted at them from the ground, his back turned toward Ami.

She could see glimpses of his pale flesh through the bursting seams of his robe, which looked as if it had shrunk in the wash until it clung skin-tight to his body. The corruption's effects were spreading at an alarming rate, she pondered, cheeks flushing behind the high collar. At least the goblins seemed immune, mostly because they weren't wearing much more than loincloths anyway.

Ami stepped past the magic user without a word and ducked into a gap between book piles when a corpulent warlock rushed past. A file of goblins ran after him like harried ducklings, wheezing and carrying heavy grimoires.

She reached the shelf she was looking for and pouted in disappointment when she could see the bare wall of the library through the large gaps between the books. The spell she was looking for was missing. She glanced over to her right, where more of the greenskins were chatting among themselves while packing tomes into a crate. A haggard warlock with a permanently furrowed brow was circling them and watching them like a hawk.

Ami hoped the list in his hands could tell her where the book currently was. She approached the group just when the goblins were lifting the crate on their shoulders. "Excuse me-"

The greenskins turned their heads to face her, and one of them spotted the red glow between the edge of her hat and the top of her cloak's collar. He whirled around to salute her, taking his hands off

the crate. Caught off guard by the sudden change in weight distribution, the other goblins stumbled and lost their grip on the wood.

With a loud clatter, the heavy box landed on the supervisor's foot and broke apart, spilling books all over the carpet. He howled in pain and started hopping on one leg. A lot of loud cursing later, he finally noticed that the goblins weren't jeering at his misfortune. Instead, they were saluting a shortish figure standing nearby.

"Y-Your Majesty?" he asked, a pained expression on his face. His bow was shallow and crooked from favouring his good leg.

"At ease, everyone," Ami said to the group. She looked at the books littering the ground. "Are those from the shelf behind me?"

The magician nodded, biting his lips.

"Thank you. You should have that foot looked at," she informed him. "Wait, don't walk. I will send you to Snyder." With a wave of her hand, she transferred him to the large hall that passed as the dungeon's infirmary for the moment. "The rest of you, go help the other warlocks," she told the goblins.

The triangle-eared creatures ran off, leaving her alone with the broken crate and disorderly pile of books and scrolls on the ground.

She sighed, her shoulders slumping. How was she going to find the spell she needed in that mess?

"Your Majesty!" Torian swept around a corner at a fast but dignified pace, his face flushed as if he had been running. "I am happy to see that you are back from your," his wide smile faltered for a moment, "excursion, and none the worse for wear!"

Ami winced a little at that. Snyder had strongly objected to her being up and about half a day after having her wounds healed, in particular since she hadn't gone to bed at all in the first place. "I'm very glad to be back, too," she answered honestly.

Torian nodded and clapped his hands. "Now, what can I help you with, Empress? Please excuse the noise and disorder but," he

shrugged "*goblins*. Not exactly the first, or second, or even third choice of assistants I would pick when it comes to moving and indexing books. If I may ask, did we displease you in some way to get *them* as help?"

"I need all my imps for urgent construction work," Ami explained. Having both her minions and the townspeople in prolonged proximity to each other was a recipe for disaster. Thus, her imps were currently hard at work at expanding the formerly undead-infested gold mine with sufficient living space for more than eight-thousand inhabitants.

"That's too bad, really." Behind him, a goblin yelled as she fell from a ladder, but his only reaction was a resigned sigh. "Would it, perhaps, be possible to delay the reorganisation until your imps are free?" he asked hopefully.

"No, this move is the perfect opportunity to get everything done in one go," Ami dashed his hopes. That didn't really answer his question, but she doubted he would appreciate learning that she simply wanted to keep her employees too busy to start trouble with the civilians. It wasn't as if she was assigning make-work - she really wanted a more efficient filing system for her library, and she *did* need all those doors the trolls were constructing, and the dark elves *were* a big help in the kitchen, and - well, suffice it to say that there were a lot of time-consuming tasks that could keep her creatures occupied, even if they wouldn't normally be considered urgent.

Torian knew better than to question his Keeper's decisions. "As you wish, your Majesty. Is there anything I can assist you with?"

"Um, I wanted to look at a specific spell, but apparently, the scroll is somewhere inside this pile." She indicated the mess on the ground.

"Well, that won't do at all. Allow me." Torian spread his arms, wide sleeves swishing, and closed his eyes. The heap quaked and trembled as he muttered under his breath, and a number of scrolls rose to the surface and floated up into the air. "Is the spell you need among these?"

Ami rapidly scanned the labels of the rolled-up parchments arranged

in grid formation in the air before her. They weren't organised according to any system she could recognise, but after a short search, she snatched one of them out of the air.

"An interesting choice," Torian said, leaning over her shoulder. When had he gotten behind her, anyway? "Very niche. Will you allow me to know what undoubtedly devious plans you will be using it in?"

"I am currently dissatisfied with the length of my hair." Ami patted her hat demonstratively.

Torian blinked. "Ah." He only stared at her blankly for a split-second before his smile returned. "I feel that I should warn you that this spell, as its nickname - the Beastly Beard Booster - implies, is meant for growing facial hair only."

Ami's shoulders drooped. Things never could be simple, could they?

"However," Torian held up a finger, "I am quite skilled at adapting existing spells to new purposes. Changing the target region should be a rather simple manipulation. If I may?" He held out his open hand.

Ami relinquished the scroll to him. It wasn't as if she had much to lose here.

Torian walked over to a wooden bookstand and removed a feather from its inkwell."Yes, as I suspected, this is rather standard fare. Let's see, scratch this rune, carry the two, switch words around here..."

With scholarly interest, Ami watched her head warlock work. Unfortunately, his handwriting made observing anything useful a little difficult.

"... and done!" With a bow, he thrust the annotated scroll to her. "Please go ahead, your Majesty!"

Ami shrank back in the face of so much enthusiasm. "Ah, I'm not in the habit of just using untested new spells on myself."

"Of course not, that would be foolish," Torian agreed. "I erroneously assumed you would like to perform the tests yourself, your Majesty. I regret my mistake." Before Ami could stop him, he pointed both hands at a passing goblin.

The greenskin stumbled in mid-step when his head sprouted coarse stubble in a lovely moss-green shade.

"That- but you can't just-" Ami protested. "Goblins normally don't even *have* hair!"

Torian clapped his hands. "Perfect proof that the spell is working as intended!"

"That's not what I mean! You can't just go and test magic on my other employees, especially if it might harm them!"

"The creature does not look overly distressed to me," Torian said.

In fact, other goblins had stopped to gawk at their unusual comrade, who was prancing about and enjoying his new-found celebrity status. His expression only turned sour after the first curious yank on his mane.

Ami slowly lowered the arm with which she had been pointing at the goblin and glared at her head warlock.

"Very well. I shall use a prisoner next time," he conceded.

"No experiments on anyone at all unless I approve it," Ami snapped. "That goes for everyone else too!"

"As you wish, Empress." Torian lowered his head, sounding mildly confused. "Would you like to peruse my modified spell now?"

After a deep and calming breath, Ami nodded and took the scroll from him, her mood brightening. She could finally get rid of her baldness and stop wearing this ridiculous pointy hat! Her gaze darted over the adjusted text of the spell. She still had trouble reading Torian's scribbles, but since the scroll was inside of her library, the knowledge of how to cast the spell appeared in the back of her mind anyway. "It seems easy enough," she said as she raised

one hand, green sparks dancing around its digits.

Moments later, she could feel her scalp tingle. A sudden burst of growth swept her hat away, and her vision went dark. Ami called a mirror to her hand and brushed aside a strand of blue hair so she could see her reflection.

"And that, my Empress, is what happens when you put too much power into the spell." Torian lectured.

"Torian," Ami began in a voice that had the warlock edge away from her. She turned towards him, one eyebrow that now hung down to her chin twitching. "Did you, by any chance, only *expand* the target region?"

A marble-sized void forced the arcs of energy whipping around it into a tightening spiral. Whenever they discharged into the black orb,a resulting flash pierced the twilight.

"Steady now!" Kunzite ordered, eyes aglow with power. Through his hands, he sent dark energy down the crystalline stalk of the pedestal before him. He held his breath when the eighth out of initially ten capacitor pillars shattered, crumbling into a pile of ash and glass dust.

Behind the central pedestal, Zoisite hissed through clenched teeth, beads of perspiration gleaming on his forehead.

"Nephrite, cancel out that fluctuation," Kunzite instructed with a sideways glance.

The third dark general frowned, and the high-pitched whine coming from the two remaining capacitors subsided after a moment.

"I have broken through!" Zoisite shouted in triumph. His long hair waved behind him as he thrust his hand at the fault in space.With a noise like shattering glass, the phenomenon collapsed in on itself before flaring out into a dark tunnel entrance.

Kunzite kept his face implacable, but inwardly, he let out a sigh of

relief. Queen Beryl's reaction to another failure would not have been pleasant.

"That's weird. Zoisite, you messed up!" Nephrite said, pointing at specks of gold that swirled in the outer perimeter of the portal.

"Who mess-"

Kunzite glanced at the phenomenon. "Remains of the barrier," he interrupted before the others could start one of their frequent squabbles. He smiled in satisfaction as Nephrite crossed his arms and dropped the matter, and he turned to face the two dozen youma waiting around the portal. "Troops, advance and secure a beachhead on the-"

Startled shouts interrupted him as fog the colour of clotted blood rushed out of the black ellipse, creeping along the floor like an unrolling carpet.

Most of the surrounding youma leapt away before the miasma covered more than their ankles. Tar-like tendrils stuck to their feet before snapping back into the main mass of the fog.

The slower youma winced and cursed, batting at their legs as they followed their companions into the air. Strange vermin made of thorns and gleaming shells skittered up their legs, joints and mandibles clicking.

Kunzite smelled sulphur and other stenches that he could even begin to identify. A burning sensation in the back of his throat made him cough. Was the fog toxic? He hadn't had to deal with a poison that could get through his magical protections for a long time now. Scowling, he covered his nose and mouth with his cape and gestured in the direction of the portal.

A shimmering cylinder of force appeared around the gateway, trapping the two closest youma within. Their slit-shaped pupils contracted in surprise as they slammed into the barrier, which was quickly filling with the vile fog. Waves of blue raced along the curved surface as they hammered against it with their fist, mouths opening and closing as it absorbed their pleas to be let out.

Dispassionately, Kunzite watched them writhe as the misshapen pests stung and bit. It didn't look as if the fog was killing the youma quickly, toxic or not. "Zoisite, connect the portal to somewhere safer!" he ordered, maintaining the shield.

"I'm - trying!" his boyfriend wheezed out between coughs. He twitched and slapped a finger-long spiky thing off his trouser leg. "Ow! Something bit me!"

"The portal, you fool," Nephrite reminded him.

This time, Kunzite didn't reprimand the other general. Not only because he was getting a little impatient too , but also because he was finding it increasingly difficult to maintain his barrier. His vision was swimming. "Youma, get rid of the vermin that got through! Zoisite, what are you waiting for?"

"It's not responding to my commands!" the other dark general complained. Pouting, he alternated between glancing at his hand and at the dark ellipse.

Kunzite frowned and spared a moment of attention for the youma, despite the building pressure behind the shield. Fans of flame, blue explosions, and bursts of dark energy were reducing the spiny vermin to shreds with little trouble. That situation, at least, seemed under control.

"So, what exactly did we drill into there?" Nephrite broke the sudden silence. He walked out from behind his console and approached the barrier, smoking carapaces crunching underneath his feet.

Kunzite shrugged. "I don't particularly care. We finally reached the target world, that is all that matters." His gaze wandered back to the two youma still trapped behind his force field.

One of them was twitching on the ground, covered in welts and bites. The other stood with her back to the barrier and dispensed sprays of acid from her fingers, protected by a layer of radiant blue slime. She might have looked a little sickly - it was hard to tell her skin tone through the layer of acid and dissolving critters - but she seemed fine otherwise.

Kunzite furrowed his brow. "Anchor the containment field." He didn't feel like maintaining the barrier on his own all day.

The youma shuffled their feet, and some glanced over at the two figures still trapped in the fog. Still, none dared speak out against his order. "Yes, Lord Kunzite." Working in pairs, they carried cone-shaped stones to the barrier and placed them on the floor. One after the other, they shoved them closer until they touched the force field in six equidistant spots.

Yellow symbols flared up on the anchor stones, and Kunzite felt the drain on his power dwindle to nothing. With his magic now freed to assist his recovery, he was feeling healthier by the second.

"But Kunzite, what about the portal?" Zoisite asked, the sweat on his brow now running down his face.

That was a good question, the white-haired general pondered. The anchor stones had been intended to stabilise the gateway. With the barrier in the way though, it would be difficult to impossible to properly apply them. Still, Queen Beryl would not be happy with further delays...

Within the fog-filled cylinder, the youma twitching on the floor stopped moving and disintegrated into fine dust.

Well, it did look as if the troops could survive long enough within that damnable atmosphere to get the job done. He could just drop the barrier, and-

A large limb shot from the portal, aimed straight at the acid-coated youma. The bony knob at its end unfolded like a sea anemone, and segmented digits wrapped around her torso. With a brutal yank, the appendage disappeared back into the black ellipse, taking the youma with it.

"What in the Great Ruler's name was that?" one of the other youma shrieked, backing away from the fog-filled barrier.

Kunzite hadn't gotten a good look at the limb in the split-second that it had been visible either. Whatever it was, it made simply dropping

the shield a much less appealing proposition. With a sigh, he turned to Zoisite. "You can stop maintaining the portal."

"What? After all this effort, we just give up?"

"Do you wish to explain to Queen Beryl why we lost youma before the invasion even began? We'll try a different spot later." Kunzite walked away, his cape swishing behind him. "Under the circumstances, we can't properly stabilise this gate."

"What a grand waste of time," Nephrite commented with a much put-upon expression before he faded out of sight.

"What is... it's not closing!" Zoisite shouted. "Something on the other side is keeping it open!"

The sound of alarm in the other dark general's voice prompted Kunzite to whirl around and return to his side. "Enemy action," he muttered. Just hitting a bad location could have been an accident, but maintaining a portal required deliberate interference. He narrowed his eyes at the golden particles still swirling around the edge of the black ellipse. "I'll close it myself." He raised one hand, palm facing outwards, and prepared to crush the gateway out of existence by compressing the shield.

The portal chose that moment to grow larger and larger, its edges passing through the barrier with no resistance. Soon, a light-devouring black pane whose borders disappeared into the surrounding rock bisected the room.

Kunzite took an involuntary step back when shrieking wails pierced the air and the first freakish invaders charged forth from the portal.

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Vanity Issues

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Ami turned her head left and right, inspecting her reflection in a wall that resembled a jagged sheet of ice. Despite its appearance, the corrupted stone didn't feel cold to her touch, and one of its dark surfaces was mirror-smooth. She traced the thin red lines marring her chin and throat with two fingers, their fingertips glowing a soft green. When she pulled them away, they were stained red, but the tiny cuts were gone.

"Finally." She stepped out of the pile of coarse blue hair at her feet. It was time to eliminate the last traces of her struggle against the Thing That Should Not Have Been. "You," she told the two imps who were chasing each other around her legs, "stop that and get rid off the rest!"

With disappointed squeals, the little servants dropped their hair whips and scuttled off to get brooms and buckets.

Satisfied, Ami returned her attention to her reflection in the mirror. She looked like a stranger to herself. Long blue hair cascaded down her back and reached to the floor, the strands in front tucked away behind her shoulders so they didn't block her sight. Fortunately, their weight kept them from sliding back to annoy her.

"Cathy, are you free for the moment?" she sent a telepathic message toward the swordswoman. While Ami wasn't entirely displeased by her new look, tripping over her own hair was unacceptable.

"The soldiers won't hurt themselves much training for a while without my supervision," Cathy's distorted voice answered in Ami's head. *"That's a yes. What do you need?"*

"I'll tell you in person. Transport impending." Ami reached through space, picked up the blonde, and set her down a few metres away.

"Hiding out in an unfinished tunnel?" The armour-clad woman commented after a brief glance at her surroundings. One already raised eyebrow crept higher when she focused properly on Ami. "The beard thing was true, then? Imagine."

Ami twitched. "I had hoped I had left before too many people could get a good look," she commented sourly.

"Only takes a single goblin to talk. They do love to talk." Cathy walked around the younger girl, inspecting her untamed mane. "Right now, your minions are speculating about why you'd want to make yourself look more appealing to dwarfs."

Ami groaned. "It was just a spell accident!"

"Female dwarfs at that," Cathy continued mercilessly, the play of the muscles around her eyes betraying her amusement.

"Please, stop," Ami said, holding up her palms. As if the corruption remodelling her dungeon wouldn't cause enough new and embarrassing rumours already. "Cathy, can you cut my hair please?" She asked, producing a pair of scissors from thin air.

"I'm not much of a barber," the blonde cautioned.

"Well, I don't think the imps could do a good job, and I'd prefer not to have any of my other subordinates get too close to me with sharp tools."

"*That* I can understand. Okay, sit down," the swordswoman said as she removed her gauntlets.

Ami took a seat on a conveniently-sized boulder, glad that it wasn't as cold as its ice-like appearance would lead one to believe.

"How do you want it?" Cathy asked as she dragged her fingers through Ami's hair.

Ami hesitated. Sometimes, she had thought herself rather plain-looking in comparison to Usagi and Rei, and had wished her hair was as long as theirs. Would Jadeite like her better with long hair? She had no idea because she knew distressingly little about him.

Come to think of it, did Beryl have long hair? Vanity aside, her primary motivation for keeping her hair short hadn't really changed. Long hair took a lot of time and effort to take care of, which she could spend better elsewhere - especially now that she was busier than ever. "Please cut it the same as it was before," she requested.

"Really? It's a shame to get rid of it all," Cathy muttered as she stepped to the side, her reflection distorting because she was no longer in front of the flat part of the wall. "Don't you think you'd look nice with braids or a ponytail?"

"Ah, everyone is used to my regular look now," Ami objected. "I don't think my non-human subordinates are good at telling humans apart by their faces, either."

"Yeah, it's not as if you have a distinctive hair colour or glowing eyes or anything," Cathy agreed in a deadpan voice. "Still, you can just grow it out again whenever you want." With a snip, a long lock of blue hair dropped to the ground. "So, what are you currently working on?"

"When I'm not adding more rooms to handle the needs of the population I'm expanding the power infrastructure," Ami said. "The magma is a lot deeper down here than on the Avatar Islands. The imps will get there, eventually, but for the moment we are drawing on gold reserves."

"I haven't heard anything about sending scouts to the surface yet, so I assume there are no windmills?" Cathy asked while she worked.

"Correct. I'm wary about adjusting the corruption for proper storms before the other problems with it are solved."

"That's probably for the best," the blonde agreed as she tilted Ami's head to the side. "Speaking of the corruption, Rabixtrel was distinctly unamused by what it was doing to his gear. I sent him back to the Islands to patrol the beaches for undead critters. Hope you don't mind."

Angry reaper? That was one problem Ami was happy had been avoided. "That was the best decision you could take. I'm glad you

got to him while he was still willing to listen."

"So am I. Oh, I think he gave the prisoner a scare on the way out."

"Oh, her." Ami's Keeper sight darted over to the prison cell close to the portal. She was treated to some very inventive foul language as the captured sorceress swore at her guards. "Do you think Tiger would be qualified to interrogate her? I'd really like to learn what she knows about the attack, but I'm afraid my other subordinates would go too far."

"She's your sister. I have no idea where she is or what she is currently doing, in any case," Cathy replied. In the mirror, Ami's hair was beginning to resemble what she was used to.

"She's delivering mail and buying supplies in the surface kingdoms," Ami informed the blonde. She sighed as a flash of a tavern interior arrived through her Keeper sight."I don't expect to be seeing her for a while. Is there anything else I should be aware of?"

The movement of the scissors stopped for a moment. "Well, the Light's rope is gone," Cathy said. "Just poof, vanished. Or maybe it's still there and we just can't find it. Either way, we don't have it any more." Snip. "Also, the Avatar isn't talking to us since he's busy campaigning somewhere. Stop nodding or I'll cut your hair wrong."

"Sorry."

"Then, there's that dungeon of Clairmonte in the swamp. Surface troops moved in shortly after we withdrew our soldiers," Cathy reported. "Should I send some back to the other three sites to keep them under our control?"

Ami pondered this for a moment. "No, they aren't worth the commitment right now. It's more important to keep this place secure. What's the status of our reaperbots?"

"Not so great. Most work, but they took some damage from the lethal corruption and need repairs. I have the detailed list on my desk, if you want to see it."

"Yes, thank you. I'll have a look at it." Ami pulled the indicated

document through space and read through it for the rest of her hairdressing session.

"Get out here right now!" was the only warning Dolzene received before the door to her cave flew open and banged into the wall, causing one of its cobbled-together boards to fall off.

Startled, the rudely-awakened youma shot upright and almost fell out of her hammock. She jumped to her feet and glared at the slender silhouette in the doorway, easily recognising the other youma by the green flames she had for hair. "What the hell, Kuzza?" she hissed through wolf-like teeth. "You are going to fix that!" she added, pointing at the splinters.

"Not now!" Kuzza hissed. "Umuk wants all warriors at the village centre! We are about to be attacked!"

Dolzene quickly snatched a dress made of scaly leather from the hook on the wall. In her rush, she bent her antennas painfully as she pulled the garment over her head. "Enemies? Here?" she gasped as she stepped out on the steep hillside. Why would anyone want to attack this collection of hovels? Kar-Il-Beryl was a backwater. Yes, there was a spring of dark magic at the bottom of the valley, but it was neither strong nor rare enough to be worth fighting over. Perhaps deeper in the wastelands, but not here.

"Maybe Nashitaka wants to rule over more subjects?" Kuzza speculated, glancing suspiciously in the direction of the spindly peaks that separated Kar-Il-Beryl from the next-closest village.

Nothing moved up there aside from the dark clouds creeping along the mountainsides.

"Great Ruler preserve us from ambitious morons!" Dolzene spat a heart-felt curse. With a leap, she took to the air.

A fist that felt like hot, moving rock caught her around the ankle and yanked her back to the ground. "Stay down, idiot! No flying! Do you want to make yourself a target?"

"Yeah, well, jogging next to someone whose main power is glowing in the dark isn't much safer!" Dolzene protested out of habit. Keeping in cover was good advice, actually. Almost everyone she knew had some sort of ranged attack. She swept her nervous gaze over the slope. How could she be sure there weren't already enemies lurking behind the greenish rocks or hiding in between the thorny mushrooms? They'd be almost impossible to spot in this twilight. She broke into a run, quietly following the other youma downhill to the village centre.

"There you two stragglers are. About time!" Umuk's harsh voice greeted them when they hopped over the squat wall that enclosed the village centre.

Dolzene suddenly found herself wishing the corral-like barrier was higher. It did a pretty good job at keeping the wind from filling the cracks in the ground with dust, but it wouldn't inconvenience even minimally motivated invaders. "Sorry, boss," she blurted out. Umuk was the leader, mainly because she'd stomp flat anyone who disagreed. So far, she hadn't given the others a reason yet to risk ganging up on her, which made her competent enough in Dolzene's opinion.

"Don't waste your breath! Get over there with the others and feed! We'll need to be at our best!" Green eyes set in a noseless face swerved towards the other youma huddling around the fissures in the ground.

The nine figures kept close to the crevices, soaking up the Great Ruler's power that seeped up from below.

Dolzene gladly joined the group and noticed that Kuzza settled down closer to the others than she normally did. Perhaps everyone was instinctively looking for safety in numbers? She certainly was feeling a little less nervous with others between her and a potentially fatal energy blast. A long sip from the magical source helped calm her nerves further. It would have been tastier if processed before consumption, but it was nourishing nonetheless.

"So what's going on?" someone asked, voicing Dolzene's own most pressing question.

Umak shrugged, the soft spines on her shoulders quaking. "We got orders from up high. All the way from the top, really. General Kunzite himself."

A gasp went through the crowd. None of the youma here had ever seen one of the generals - or even Queen Beryl's palace - with their own eyes, and now they were getting orders from there?

"Anyway, we are supposed to destroy a bunch of invaders that are coming our way, then report in at Keshlanfall's stronghold," Umuk continued.

Dolzene groaned. Combat. Also, Keshlanfall was about two days travel away. Oh well. Trying to look on the bright side, she hoped that whatever they had been drafted for would already be over by the time they reached the fortress and its teleport gate.

"Invaders?" Kuzza spoke up.

"A herd of weird rampaging beasts," Umuk said. "Some of them can apparently get pretty big and dangerous. Oh yeah, and I'm also supposed to show all of you how to do this, so watch closely!" She clapped her hands together. When she pulled them apart, a small sphere of light floated between her palms, humming softly as it shivered in the air. At a wave of Umuk's wrist, the bluish spark flew off, tumbling randomly through the air like a butterfly.

"What's that?" Dolzene asked as she tracked the slow-moving light.

Umuk shrugged. "Fuck if I know. Palace sent the spell along with our orders. We are supposed to keep some close to us at all times while we fight." She put her hands on the top of the wall and looked toward the east. "Now start practising it until you have it down! I'll be on the lookout for the enemy."

"No, you absolutely have to give them clear guidelines," Cathy explained, her voice echoing off the stone walls, the stone pillars, and the stone furniture. Even the elevated throne at the back of the room was made of the same smoothly-polished material.

It sounds like an empty room, Ami thought. Hopefully, hard stone would remain unchanged by the corruption for the duration of the gathering she had planned. "Why is defining a protocol so important?" she asked absently, watching her imps work from the edge of the dais she was standing on.

One of the black-eyes minions had just run out of padded mats. Unable to render the last of the twenty chairs around her assigned table less cold and uncomfortable, she stepped from one foot on the other and made confused noises.

"Look, I know you don't insist on formalities, but the villagers? They don't. They are used to rules for interacting with the nobility and will be lost without them. I doubt you'll get them to be of any use while they are busy worrying about when you are going to punish them for not scraping and bowing at the right time."

"The troops from the Underworld don't seem to have that issue." Now where had the imp's last padded mat gone? Ami's quick check of the other four tables didn't reveal it.

Cathy crossed her arms, looking a little annoyed. "That's because they are different. Mercenaries, not vassals. Besides," she pointed at Ami, "Keeper. They kind of expect you to just punish them whenever you feel like it, no matter how much they adhere to protocol. They obviously try not to annoy you, but since you haven't given any specific instructions about how to go about their grovelling, they just do whatever they think is appropriate."

"Is that so?" That was certainly a little irritating and also something Ami hadn't thought about in quite those terms. "So the civilians expect there to be rules that protect them as long as they don't break them, but my soldiers don't?"

"That's the gist of it."

"All right, I can see why a protocol would make them feel safer," Ami said with a nod. She also made a mental note to clarify things for her underlings later, once she had figured out how to go about it. "Can you please set something up, but keep it simple? Nothing lengthy or complicated. They'd probably get scared too if *I* didn't act as

expected because I forgot the appropriate response."

"You won't have to do much," Cathy assured her. "I'll simply cover how to greet and address you, seating order, and similar things concerning their conduct." She paused and stared at the ceiling. "Also, that's one lazy imp."

Ami followed the blonde's gaze and spotted the missing mat, draped over one of the lamps hanging above each of the tables. On it slept an imp, curled around the wire. Ami blinked, surprised by an imp shirking her duties. She glanced at the table that had been assigned to the servant in question. All paddings and notepads already were in place. Not so much shirking duties as stealing from her fellows, then. How should she handle this?

The double door at the other end of the room swung open, interrupting her train of thought.

"Ah, Mercury, I see you are back to normal," Jered said as he entered the room, carrying a large packet wrapped in brown cloth in his arms. "Looking good."

Behind him, Jadeite paused and peered at the blue-haired girl more closely. "Back to normal from what?" he asked, sounding alarmed.

"I got a haircut," Ami answered quickly, sparing him - and herself - the grisly details.

"Oh." The dark general took a closer look at her head and nodded, his expression returning to polite disinterest.

"On that note, we need to address the issue of your wardrobe for your meeting with the civilians," Jered brought up.

Ami looked down at herself. With her hair restored, she had discarded the cloak, leaving her clad in her black, gold-embroidered Keeper uniform. "I can just keep wearing this," she said. Sure, the patterns might have shifted a little, and it was clinging tighter to her chest and hips than it used to, but the corruption hadn't managed anything worse yet. "It's not conjured, so it's holding up well, and I can hide further problems with magic for the duration of the

meeting."

"I believe that would be missing a great opportunity," Jered said, "People will be upset about the styles that the corruption imposes on us." His teeth clenched as his brown eyes briefly darted down to his open shirt. All of the garment's buttons were missing, leaving his bare chest visible.

Ami nodded, agreeing so far. She wasn't exactly happy about what was going on either, to put it mildly.

"Well, there's a way to make them less upset. If they get the impression that you are humiliating them by forcing this garb on them, that will be bad," Jered continued. "If they realise they are in it with you together? Much less resistance and discontent. Therefore, you should be wearing one of the altered things for the meeting."

"What?" Ami's stomach plummeted at the mere thought of addressing a room full of people while wearing something that revealing. She still had Tiger's distressingly accurate summary of the available styles in mind."We don't have any adjusted outfits, though," she pointed out with great relief. "The dwarfs will need at least a few days to finish them." Which was one of the reasons for the assembly in the first place. She needed the local artisans to come up with stopgap solutions until the commissioned designs were ready.

"I have taken that into account." Jered unpacked his cargo onto one of room's tables, spreading out a varied selection of garments. "I asked Jadeite to conjure a large number of different outfits and then waited for the corruption to make its adjustments. These are the passable ones."

Ami's first impression was one of moth-eaten fabric, stains, and general ragged crudeness. "That's, um, nice," she said without conviction as she approached the table, peering at the various ensembles with morbid curiosity. She skipped the variants that resembled two-piece swimwear and examined the more substantial specimen. Between plunging necklines, snug leather, and fabric thin enough to be see-through, there wasn't a single one that hadn't her cheeks heating up.

Well, perhaps she was overreacting a little. Some of these outfits could conceivably be worn by someone in her world going out partying. Someone much more confident than her. Someone who wouldn't mind the disapproving looks and whispers from her elders.

And then there was the stuff like the wizard robe that rattled when Cathy lifted it. "This doesn't look very comfortable," the swordswoman commented as she inspected the mosaic of crystal shards interconnected by bits of fabric. She draped one of its sleeves over her eyes. "Not to mention that it doesn't hide anything! I'm sure you can see me scowling at you right through it, Jered!"

"The pattern is opaque in strategic locations," the brown-haired man answered, taking a step back and out of her elbow range.

Ami noted that none of the garments before her would be particularly warm or protective. "Where are the raincoats, winter mantles, thick tunics, and similar things?" Her dungeon heart prohibited the corruption from impeding function, so warm clothes should have been safe. Their absence was unexpected.

"We eliminated those," Jadeite spoke up. "They developed patterns ranging from the obscene to the disgusting *and* obscene."

"Besides, it's too warm down here for those," Jered added. He stepped up to Cathy's side and rapped his knuckles against her armour. "You better watch out for that pattern effect too, because I don't remember your breastplate starting out with sculpted nipples."

"Oh, you have got to be kidding me!" his girlfriend explained after a look down at herself.

Ami ignored the byplay in favour of paying more attention to Jadeite. His grey uniform was just the right colour to blend in with the walls like some kind of camouflage pattern. "Jadeite, you helped pick out the outfits, then?"

The dark general nodded. Was that a faint blush on his cheeks or just wishful thinking on Ami's part?

Miraculously, the clothes didn't seem so bad any more. Ami reached

for a blue dress that looked passable, aside from the vines caressing the chest area. She got the impression that it was one size too small for her, but at least the hem came down lower than on her Sailor Mercury uniform. That slit at the side would probably go up all the way to her waist, though.

"Cathy, what do you think about all of this?" Ami requested an unbiased second opinion.

"About the suggestion or the clothes?" the blond asked. "Jered's idea is unpleasant, but it has a tiny bit of merit. People often try to emulate the ruling classes if they can afford it. As for *those*..." she gestured at the clothes, nose wrinkled in disdain. "Well, obviously I don't like them. Still, they are comparable to the reaper outfit or your Mercury uniform, and-"

Ami whipped her head sideways and she stared at Cathy with wide eyes. "You seriously think my uniform is similar to the reaper's tiny rags?"

Cathy shrugged. "Well, they are both out of my comfort zone and cover too little."

"But, that..." This vicious slander against Ami's costume had her momentarily speechless. Her uniform certainly wasn't as bad as the things on the table or the demon's garb! Different cultures, she reminded herself. Okay, so what if the skirt was tiny and the rest could masquerade successfully as a swimsuit? It was still much better than- she clenched her teeth when she realised that this description would also fit a few of the outfits she was looking at. "The reaper armour shows a lot more skin than my sailor uniform!" she focused on the core of the issue.

"And yet you have worn them both in public," the swordswoman said, her eyelids half-closed.

Ami couldn't tell if Cathy was arguing seriously or just teasing her at this point. What she *could* discern was that Jadeite had suddenly looked up and was staring at her, his eyes widened in mild surprise.

"Only in the Underworld!" she hurried to clarify. "It fits right in there!

The denizens would even expect a Keeper to wear something like it!"

"And the civilians here would expect you to be some kind of horrible tyrant who torments and humiliates them for her own amusement," Jered took the opening.

Ami sighed. "All right, you made your point. I'll wear one of them to the meeting."

"Excellent. I suggest this one," Jered said, holding up a two-piece outfit that made Ami blush just looking at it. While its frost flower patterns were very pretty, they were also made of tiny holes in the cloth. In addition, the flimsy thing somehow combined skimpiness with looking as if it would fall apart at the slightest provocation.

"Are you serious? That's the worst of the lot!"

"Not by a long shot. We sorted the really terrible ones out, remember?" Jered said, grinning.

Ami crossed her arms and shot him a dark look. "Please *do* explain that choice," she said in a freezing tone of voice. "I'm sure that Cathy would love to hear your reasoning, too."

To his credit, Jered didn't so much as flinch under the combined glare of the two females. "That's quite simple, actually. The villagers will accept the tamer designs more easily if they are aware that you could have asked for much worse. They'll be relieved that they won't have to go that far, even!"

"I'm. Not. Wearing. That." Ami stated with finality. Jered's words made a certain twisted sense, but not enough to make her consider being seen in public like that.

"But think of the long term-"

"No! It's too embarrassing!" Ami interrupted.

"General Jadeite, back me up on this!" Jered called out to the man hiding out in a shadowy corner and trying not to be noticed. "What's your opinion?"

Put on the spot like that, the dark general coughed into his hand. "I'm afraid that to outside observers, it will appear as if Mercury is forcing her subjects to wear highly questionable garb. Whether or not she joins in is an unimportant detail of the bigger picture."

"My reputation is ruined," Ami groaned as she buried her head in her hands. She was never going to get rid of those nasty rumours about her at this rate. Why did those stupid dark gods have to give her so much trouble even after their plan had come to naught?

"That doesn't really help me convince her," Jered complained. He turned back to Ami. "Well, actually, it does. I mean, if the reputation damage is pretty much the same either way, then you can commit with no regrets to not coming across as a whimsical tyrant!"

Ami looked at the proffered scraps of fabric again. She tried to imagine herself wearing them, blushed, and vigorously shook her head. "I'd rather wear the reaper armour than that!"

"But-"

"How about I pick from one of those instead?" Ami compromised, pointing at a section of the pile that contained clothes she might actually consider wearing. At a beach. A beach where nobody knew her.

"Not perfect, but it will do," the wavy-haired man said with a smile. "Also, that corruption-made look isn't really fit for an empress. We'll use your choice as a template for the proper costume, so we can make some adjustments."

"There is certainly room for improvement." Ami had no objections against trying to inject as much dignity as possible into this lamentable duty. Getting rid of the frayed seams and using clean, higher-quality cloth would certainly make the garments more presentable.

Jered's mouth widened into a rather smug grin as he collected the pieces Ami had chosen. "Also, did you notice that my suggested plan unquestionably works? I bet you wouldn't have taken any of these into closer consideration before I confronted you with the

alternative!"

Ami's fingers twitched in irritation. She took a deep, calming breath and suppressed the sudden urge to throw the heap of so-called clothing at him. "I am going to wear a cloak over it," she declared. "Come up with one that won't deteriorate too much from the corruption!"

"Sure, we can try some work on that too," he agreed and clapped his hands. "That's settled then. When do you want the artisans to be here?"

"Not so fast!" Ami held up a palm. "We have to consider *your* wardrobe too, after all" she continued sweetly. "I'm not going out like that alone. It's well known that the larger a group of people does something, the more normal it appears!"

"That is, of course, correct," Jered agreed after only a moment of hesitation. "We'll make the necessary arrangements and show-"

"*And*," Ami pressed on while her annoyance was still giving her enough boldness to do so, "I'm going to pick them out for you!"

Ami's heart hammered in her chest as Jadeite and Jered stared at her like deer in the headlight. In the background, she heard Cathy snickering.

Constructed using white marble from a nearby quarry, the small city and its oracle tower gleamed in the sunlight. Said tower, being the tallest structure for as far as the eye could see, loomed three times higher than the flat roof of the next-tallest building. With the sun low in the sky, its shadow reached out to the untamed savannah just beyond the outermost ring of plantations.

On the wind-swept top of the structure, one male and one female fairy held unto a stone pole inlaid with angular runes. A fresh pair of fairies approached and put their hands on the magic-sucking obsidian. The sweat-drenched initial pair let go, expressions of relief on their faces. Both slumped down on a set of pillows that had been

set aside for them, right next to a pitcher filled with cold juice.

Hieron of the Plains, sitting on a disc-shaped platform at the top of the obsidian pole, didn't pay any attention to the activities of the youngsters below. Doing so would be disrespecting their efforts to keep his crystal ball properly powered. Instead, he focused all of his attention on the images within the orb, occasionally moving his gnarled hands to change perspectives.

"Such a crude, ineffective way of scrying," Jogar of the Forests muttered, his ghostly projection hovering above Hieron's shoulder.

The old man didn't look up. "I cannot help it that the dark empress took our embassy staff to a place outside of our range."

"We really should be pressuring her more about finishing the embassy's oracle tower," the higher-ranking seer noted. He glanced at the fairies shown by the crystal ball. "They are within dwarf territory now, are they not?"

"The kingdom of Nimbadnur, to be precise," Hieron said.

"To me, our ambassador does not look too happy about it," Jogar added after a moment.

"She is scowling and shouting at the others, oh masterful expert of body language," Hieron said. "Unless you are also a master of lip-reading, you will not be able to tell me anything new there."

"She is clearly immature if she takes her anger out on her staff," the ghostly oracle commented, "even if her forced relocation is ample reason for a sinister mood. Why do you think the dark empress abandoned her realm in the first place?"

"It's a bit too early to tell. Her hurried departure and the loss of all her claimed territory would suggest bitter defeat," Hieron of the Plains speculated.

"You don't say."

"However, if we look at the bigger picture, it becomes a little harder to tell. Nobody has stepped up to fill the power vacuum on the

Avatar Islands. At the very least, she took out her attackers too." Hieron stretched his legs, their joints making soft popping noises. "Now, how many ghosts have you spotted in those wretched wastelands since she left?"

"I haven't been looking for them," Jogar replied, waving his transparent hand dismissively.

"Well, I have, and I haven't found any with a cursory search. It seems that whatever else happened, the undead population of her realm went down dramatically. Perhaps enough to justify the losses she took abandoning the place."

"Are you suggesting that this is simply a part of her longer-term strategy?" Jogar asked, alarmed.

"It's a possibility," Hieron confirmed with a nod. "If she plans to return, then it would be convenient for her if she didn't have to worry about roving swarms of ghosts for decades to come."

"If this move was part of her plans, then the dwarfs are in more danger than we thought. It is about time we warn them about the evil presence within their lands."

Hieron frowned. "That is irregular. Does the Emperor approve?"

"His Imperial Majesty is currently unavailable. He has withdrawn into his inner sanctum, leaving strict orders not to disturb him for anything less than a dire emergency."

"The timing is inconvenient. When will he return from his seclusion?" Hieron asked. It wasn't exactly unusual for powerful magicians to occasionally need peace and quiet for their work. He could feel the magical energies surrounding the Imperial Palace even from here.

"He did not say." Jogar answered, his image shifting sideways.

"Indeed? That is *very* unusual." Hieron tapped his wrinkled fingers against the crystal ball, which turned black. "I see his tower is active."

"Yes. This decision is one that will be up to the councillors," Jogar

said.

"They'll simply follow our advice so they have someone to shift the blame to, as usual," Hieron predicted.

"Naturally. In this particular situation, the dangers of inactions are larger than the potential costs of action. I shall advise them to inform the King of Nimbadnur about the trespassers in his realm."

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Bad news

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Ami stood amidst piles of clothes scattered across the floor of an otherwise empty chamber. She rested her head on her hands, feeling her cheeks burn underneath her fingers. Why again had she rashly told Jered that she would pick his outfit? Sure, it had been satisfying to see his flabbergasted expression after he had irritated her so, but... She shook her head. The conjured bits and pieces on the ground didn't really deserve to be called "clothes" any longer after the corruption had altered them. If anything, they had turned out worse than the female ones.

Picking from a pile at random, she levitated a collection of thin, belt-like leather straps and turned it in the air before her. She paused in confusion, and her eyes glazed over as she imagined it attached to the male body in various ways to figure out how exactly it was supposed to be worn. Blushing even harder, she let it drop back to the ground. While thinking about Jadeite or even Jered wearing some of this stuff wasn't unpleasant, the implications were mortifying. She'd have to *ask* them to wear something from this room! Even just thinking about how they'd judge her for her choice felt as if a bucket of cold water had been upended over her head. Sweating, she sighed and nervously looked around once more. She had to find something reasonable. Or at least something that wouldn't make her wish for the ground to swallow her when the time came to present it to its intended wearers.

Ami returned her attention to a section of the room she hadn't surveyed yet. The sight of a pile of items rightfully forgotten by fashion made her whimper, and her remaining resolve abandoned ship. Codpieces.

No. Enough! She wasn't dealing with this! She was an empress, and therefore had *other* people who could be dealing with this instead! *Venna, Eline, I'm going to transport you to me shortly. Get ready,* she mentally called out to the two dark elves.

She was confident that with a few precise instructions, they would do a good job. Coming from a culture with questionable fashion trends, they were probably more qualified than her, anyway. The stuff on the ground seemed like the sort of thing that the dark elf tailor who had made her Keeper uniform had initially tried to foist on her.

Ami wrinkled her nose and looked at her gold-trimmed black sleeve. Said uniform was getting a noticeably uncomfortable in this underground heat, and it was also feeling a little tight. She suspected the latter had more to do with her being a growing girl than with any detrimental corruption effects, though. She decided that she would change into something else as soon as she had briefed Eline and Venna.

Count Ornish rushed past a line of busts depicting his liege's ancestors, sparing no glance at their marble-sculpted features. His attention remained focused on the wide-open doorway at the end of the corridor.

A young dwarven lad in the livery of a messenger appeared between the iron wings of the door and left the room at a jog. He politely inclined his head toward Ornish as he passed him.

The count returned the greeting with a barely-perceptible nod and continued onwards. The guards in front of the door, clad entirely in gleaming plate and leaning on their war mauls, waved him through without hesitation.

Inside the room, Duke Libasheshtan stood behind a table covered in maps. He was talking rapidly to the captain of the cities' militia, his black beard bobbing up and down. The arsenal master was hovering around the two, wringing his hands, while the duke's champion contemplated the map.

A large monster of a wolfhound was the first to notice Ornish' arrival and wagged his tail before he returned his attention to gnawing on a bone.

"My Liege, I have arrived as soon as I could," Ornish announced himself

"Ah, Count," the Duke said as he turned and shook the other dwarf's hand. A brief but sincere smile flickered over his futures before his deep frown returned."Old friend, I'm sorry to interrupt your and your wife's visit to my city, but I have grave news concerning your County."

"The orcs are amassing for an invasion?" Ornish guessed. Glancing at the map, he had no trouble recognising his home terrain under the light of the runes winding around the chamber's pillars

"If only," the Duke shook his head sadly. "This situation is much worse. Our King has informed me that the Dark Empress herself has established a foothold in the Barony of Whitemountains."

Ornish felt his hackles rise. A Keeper was no laughing matter, and this one was particularly problematic. "How accurate is that information?" he asked tersely.

"We were warned about her presence by two independent sources. Preliminary scrying has revealed odd storm patterns around Highroot mountain, hinting at a dungeon in the area," the Duke elaborated, pointing at a white-patterned area on the map.

Ornish swore loud enough to make the dog in the corner start and whine. "Highroot. That's undeveloped area. Good, since it's away from my people, bad because it will take longer to get our troops over there."

"Do not fear, all of Nimbadnur will stand with you against this danger," Duke Libasheshtan assured him. "I have already ordered five hundred of my city guards to accompany you on your way home. Likewise, you will soon receive reinforcements from my other vassals, and eventually all of the kingdom."

"They cannot arrive quickly enough," Ornish said, his mind racing. He could personally call upon about one thousand dwarfs, and each of his three barons on a little under that. If he could bring all of his forces to bear at once, it might be enough for the task at hand. Of

course, that would mean the survivors would be returning to homes raided and pillaged by the ever-vigilant orc tribes. Still, the Duke's assistance almost doubled the number of professional warriors he commanded, which would help a great deal with the morale of the rest.

"Contain her where she is, and they *will* be there in time!" Libasheshtan said with conviction. "No foul Keeper shall divide our lands again!"

"As you command, my liege." Buying time was something he felt able to handle. His miners and engineers could compete with the best.

"I shall be joining you about one week from now with veterans recalled from the outlying towns and villages," the Duke promised. "In the meantime, Toltotbom here-"

The captain of the guard bowed.

"- will be training more militia."

Toltotbom snorted. "About a month for now, they'll still not be good for much more than garrison duty, but-"

"That will free the bulk of our forces from their current duties," Ornish finished. If the other dukes handled matters similarly, then their forces would be arriving soon after. A different worry kept occupying his thoughts. "What if the Dark Empress shows herself?"

"Our loyalty to the King will see us through," the Duke said. "She has no legitimate claim to the throne, unlike the pretender."

"May he enjoy the fruits of his actions in the afterlife." Ornish turned towards the door. "By your leave? I have a home to protect."

"Go with all haste, Count, and may we all enjoy hearing the bards sing about our victory in the not too far future!"

Darkness reigned within Ami's new office, contested only by the

candelabras placed on the four corners of her desk. The desk itself was a partially hollowed-out rock block so large that they were well outside of her reach. She would have to climb on top of it and crawl across its glass-covered surface to be in any danger of accidentally toppling one of the lights. As the rest of her office matched the desk's scale, the candlelight failed to reach the walls, leaving the bookshelves lining them them shrouded in darkness.

Ami pushed back her chair, making a scraping noise that echoed in the vast, almost empty chamber. She didn't need her eyes to see within her dungeon, but right now, she was using entirely mundane senses to check if visitors would see anything they shouldn't. In theory, the darkness would hide the fact that her office - size aside - wasn't exactly fit for an empress. She didn't see much use in expending time and resources on ostentatious decorations when the corruption would just ruin them soon. For the moment, she had simply covered every exposed stone surface in a layer of glass to create an illusion of sophistication. Hopefully, it would also encourage any modifications to develop along the lines of fragility and her own ice themes.

So far, that scheme had mostly gained her damp walls.

Well, closer inspection also revealed tiny fractures within the glass that reflected the dim light, arranged in glittering constellations that resembled frost flowers. Ami deemed this a more favourable result than she had any reason to expect.

She stepped around her desk and focused her attention on its front. To her satisfaction, the Mercury symbol emblazoned onto its solid front remained yet untainted by the corruption.

Now that she had verified that there was nothing in the room that would embarrass her in front of visitors, Ami focused on her connection to her dungeon heart. Guided by her intent, a square section of the floor shattered, its tiles coming loose and evaporating into blue smoke. Drawing upon the prison blueprint, Ami made vertical steel bars grow from the ground in a square pattern. She briefly transported herself into the cell and tried to cast spells outside, but they didn't get through the spaces between the bars. Good, the cage was safe. Invoking her Keeper transport again, Ami

reappeared behind her desk.

Confident that no tentacle monsters, goblins, or buckets full of dirty water were around, she transported the captured enemy sorceress into her office.

A slender woman with long, black hair dropped onto the straw-covered ground behind the bars and let out a startled gasp. With a snake-like twist of her body, she catapulted herself back into upright position, landing in a defensive crouch.

Ami's eyes widened as she noticed the prisoner's dress. The slinky thing consisted mostly of loose strips of cloth that barely covered the essentials - before it had taken battle damage.

The woman spun around, squinting against the light of the torches affixed to her cell as she took in her new surroundings. Her garment waved from her rapid motion, revealing that she was unlikely to be wearing anything else.

Flushing, Ami kept her gaze firmly on the knot that kept a snapped shoulder strap together, and she dropped one of her cloaks into the cell.

By now, the magician had turned to face Ami, or at least her desk. She flinched when the cloak appeared before her, and a pink light flickered briefly over her fingertips. It died down almost immediately, and she snatched the flowing garment out of the air and draped it around herself. Now properly covered, she sank to one knee and inclined her head. "Her Imperial Majesty, Empress Mercury I presume?"

"Yes," Ami replied in a neutral voice, standing up. "And you are?"

"My name is Monteraine," the sorceress introduced herself. "Head - or rather, former head of Morrigan's warlocks."

"Morrigan?" Ami asked quietly, needing a moment to connect the name with the Keeper who had - briefly - interfered with her invasion of the Avatar Islands. "He is the one whose attack distracted Zarekos, right? So that was him with that flying dungeon."

"Yes. Keeper Morrigan, ardent worshipper of Azzathra," Monteraine elaborated. "Given his lamentable choice of a deity, it should be immediately obvious that he would only hire magic users whose skills were valuable enough to overcome his distaste for them."

Ami considered this.

Monteraine took her silence as an invitation to keep talking. "Frankly, I am surprised that your Majesty did not choose to question me about him earlier."

Morrigan had not made it onto the list of urgent issues Ami was concerned about even before Jadeite had kicked him off the Avatar Islands. "He slipped my mind," she admitted. "It's not as if he has made much of a lasting impression so far."

Monteraine stared at her, blinking once before she remembered to close her mouth. " Forgive my insolence, your Majesty, but how can you say that?" Her voice grew a little lower, as if she wasn't entire sure that continuing her current line of reasoning was wise. "He cost you a dungeon heart, your Imperial Majesty!"

Ami shook her head. "I was planning to abandon that dungeon anyway, and all he did was make me speed up my plans," she explained. "His presence was rather helpful, actually, since it let me get rid of all of those ghosts at once."

"You are saying that he was merely collateral damage?" Monteraine asked, sounding mildly irritated.

Ami narrowed her eyes at her. "Is there a problem with that?"

The woman shrank away from the bars and inclined her head more deeply. "Of course not, your Majesty. I was merely- well, I was expecting such an unusual and original angle of attack to be more than a little inconvenience, even for you!"

She almost sounded cheated, Ami thought. Monteraine's praise for the plan was odd too, given that she had only mentioned Morrigan with slight disdain until now. "Oh! It was your idea, wasn't it?"

Monteraine twitched, and a few beads of sweat glittered on her

forehead. "You are very perceptive, your Imperial Majesty. I'm, err, of course not disappointed that I failed to harm you," she hastened to clarify. "It's only that such abject failure stings my professional pride a little."

"Sorry? I'm sure it would have given me some trouble if I hadn't been preparing to move," Ami found herself consoling the sorceress. Perhaps that was because her hairstyle reminded her a little of Rei?

Monteraine coughed into her hand. "Um. Well, you are not at all what I expected, your Imperial Majesty. I had not taken you for an admirer of the Shining Concord's style, for example," she finished with a light questioning tone.

Ami had ordered a replica of the fairies' outfit from blue cloth from her trolls, and it fit her quite well. If the swimsuit-like uniform was used by a nation's military, she had convinced herself, then it could hardly be considered indecent. No matter what it looked like. "It has some practical advantages," Ami replied.

"Indubitably," Monteraine agreed in a dry voice.

Ami got the sinking feeling that the sorceress was not thinking about how suitable it was for the hot underground climate. Or that the corruption was unlikely to eat away at it. Or even how it was mental preparation for Ami's *other* performance today. "In any case, I brought you here to decide what to do about you," she said in an effort to get back on track.

"You could hire me, your Imperial Majesty,"Monteraine suggested immediately. "I assure you that I am a sorceress of rare creativity and skill. I do feel inspired by your work with three-dimensional wards, even if my own research has not yet managed to catch up."

Ami blinked at that, having no idea what Monteraine was talking about. It did sound like something that could be potentially of interest, though.

"Obviously, since Morrigan and you share similar interests, much of my knowledge and experience could also be applied in your service without major modifications."

"How so?" Ami asked, dreading the answer. From her short conversations with Morrigan's former minions, she had gathered that he was as horrible a deviant as she was rumoured to be.

"I'm very good at making improvements. Morrigan certainly did not gain his huge, sculpted body and his good looks through diligent training and a healthy diet." She hesitated for a moment, scrutinizing Ami more closely. "However, I can see that bulging muscles are not necessarily something you would want for yourself, your Majesty. Fortunately, I have improvements more suitable for the female body in my repertoire too." She raised her hands and moved them in a curving gesture through the air. "Perhaps you would like me to help along your body's development a little?"

Ami wondered when exactly she had lost control of the conversation. Not that the notion of improving her looks wasn't tempting, as Jadeite might appreciate- what was she thinking? This wasn't the time to get distracted by her hormones! "Um, I'm not certain I'd want to make use of those skills at all," she muttered and sank deeper into her chair.

Her protest didn't distract Monteraine from her sales pitch. "Understandable. Naturally, you needn't only take my word for it. If you want to inspect some of my work more closely-"

"Stop! Put that back on!" Ami shouted, covering her eyes as Monteraine began to slid out of her cloak.

"As you wish," the sorceress acquiesced, sounding surprised. There was a rustle of cloth as she recovered her clothing and and wrapped it around herself. "A-as I was about to explain, I have made various rather skilful adjustments to myself. Properly matching volume and skin elasticity, for example, is-"

Someone knocked at the door. "Your Majesty? We need you to approve the selection we made!" a female voice called from outside, accompanied by a suppressed giggle.

Ami glanced past Monteraine at the entrance. That would be Venna and Eline then, a little ahead of schedule. She called "Enter!" almost before she had consciously realised how much she wanted a break

from Monteraine's antics.

Eline's slim, pointy-eared silhouette appeared in the brightly-lit gap as she opened the tall door. Carrying a tray loaded with clothes, the albino entered, followed by the curvier form of Venna. Both of the dark elves hesitated in the entrance as their eyes adjusted to the darkness.

Ami glanced at their trays with one half curiosity and one half worry. Had they managed to find something reasonable? Before she could check, tray and contents clattered to the floor.

"You!" Eline hissed, red eyes widening in recognition as she stared at the figure within the cage.

"Hmm?" Monteraine turned to face her. "It's imprudent to point at people who can turn you into a rock with a few words."

"Shut up!" the dark elf shouted as she stalked towards the bars, producing a dagger from somewhere within her trousers. She whirled towards Ami and dropped to one knee. "My Empress, can I have her? Please?"

"What? No!" Ami answered, blinking at the usually placid woman whose fingers were clenching and unclenching. A quick glance behind the dark elf revealed that Venna was glowering at the sorceress too. "Explain!" she demanded, still surprised by the sudden hostility.

"She's was the one in charge of breaking minions to suit Morrigan's whims!" Eline snarled and clenched her teeth.

Ami's heart skipped a beat. With the way Monteraine was dressed, she hadn't expected that. "You mean like..." Ami threw a significant glance in Venna's direction.

Eline nodded, making a growling sound in the back of her throat.

"Monteraine, is that true?"

Monteraine had followed Ami's gaze to the large-chested dark elf and therefore missed the Keeper's eyes flaring brighter. "That? Oh,

yes. Morrigan's too impatient and makes nothing but a terrible mess with my spells more often than not." She frowned at Venna's clingy dress. "She looks vaguely familiar, but- Aha! Someone undid my work? Impressive. It's supposed to be permanent."

"You bitch!" Eline snarled. "I'll gut you like-"

"Eline, stop!" Ami shouted as the dark elf lunged towards the bars.

The albino froze and somehow managed to pale further upon seeing Ami's displeased expression."Y-yes your Majesty."

"I will not let my employees kill each other over past grievances," Ami proclaimed quickly, trying to get some time to think.

"Not a minion yet," Eline mumbled in protested, barely audible.

"What about just a little stabbing instead?" Venna suggested cheerfully. "Let her exercise her spells that prevent scarring."

Ami found herself seriously considering the notion for a split-second. Appalled, she clamped down on her anger for Monteraine, caused by the sorceress complete disregard for her victim. She shook her head. "Neither will I tolerate them harming each other." Then, she looked directly at the sorceress. "Nor will I let those grievances remain unaddressed."

"Perfectly reasonable," Monteraine agreed. "Infighting is such a bother. Just leave the two of them to me for an hour, and they won't even remember they were ever angry at me."

Feeling sickened by sorceress' approval-seeking smile, Ami glared at her. "That would most definitely be harming them!" She took a deep breath. "Monteraine, I am convinced by now that you are not prospective hireling material."

The black-haired woman recoiled as if slapped. "What? But your Majesty! You can't be serious! I'm too valuable to kill! I- I have different skills too! I'm m-multi-talented, really!" Monteraine stammered. She swallowed when she saw the huge grin on Eline's face. "I can be useful!"

Lack of skills wasn't the problem, unfortunately. Ami's sense of justice was screaming at her to punish the sorceress. At the same time, it was complaining about only punishing evildoers when their victims made her aware of their crimes. Not that she had much choice in the matter. Pragmatically speaking, she couldn't afford to investigate the past of her underlings if she didn't want to get rid of most of them. Ami grimaced. She hated having to make excuses like that to herself. At which point would she go too far and become part of the system?

"He's not back yet - shouldn't be back yet!" Monteraine shouted, her voice getting shriller. "Morrigan, I mean. You could strike right now! I can find his dungeons for you!"

Ami listened up. Getting rid of an enemy Keeper was worth her while, even if Morrigan had been something of an involuntary asset so far."Why did you work for someone like him anyway?" she asked. Knowing the black-haired woman's motives would make it easier to decide what to do with her.

"It's not as if I had much choice!" the sorceress blurted out, some confidence returning. "You don't think he uses his spells only on his toys, do you? Or that I could have just walked out on him? He's worshipping Azzathra!" She took a deep breath. "If you are a warlock and he wants something from you, you had better damn well give it to him! And if you can't..." she looked at the floor. "Suffice it to say that these last few weeks where he demanded that we recreate your Majesty's achievements were extremely unpleasant."

"Serves you right," Venna hissed in the back.

Ami felt less inclined to share the dark elf's sentiment now. She knew all too well what it was like to be stuck within circumstances that sharply limited one's options. However, there was Monteraine's complete lack of regret... Argh, how was she supposed to do what was *right?* "Monteraine, tell me what you know about Morrigan. If your information is accurate and useful, I will hire you."

"Thank you for that chance to prove myself, your Majesty," Monteraine said while bowing.

Ami could hear Eline grind her teeth. "However, your wages will go to your past victims as compensation," Ami continued.

Monteraine's face fell. "That's - that is -"

"Would you prefer it if they took it out of your hide instead?" Ami interrupted sharply. "This way, at least, you'll be worth more alive to them than dead."

"I see your point, your Majesty," Monteraine said, glancing over at the two glowering dark elves.

Venna leaned over and whispered something into Eline's ear, making the shorter woman smirk.

Ami didn't catch the words that were exchanged, but decided that she'd need to keep an eye on that situation. If she kept Monteraine, anyway. Addressing the sorceress again, she said "Now, I want to hear about Morrigan's lairs. Right after you have turned my vampire whom you petrified back to normal."

Last edited: Jul 1, 2016

Delivering Presents

Originally on 2013-08-08T03:05:00

Monteraine descended the winding staircase, hating every moment of it. She hated that the steps were so tall she had to sit down and let her legs dangle over the edge. She hated how the cold stone scraped her skin when she gave herself a push and slid down onto the next step. She hated how every such slide brought her closer to Morrigan's dungeon, and she *especially* hated that she couldn't loudly curse the one responsible for this.

Tiny rodent claws pricked her neck as the dark empress held on tighter, hidden underneath the sorceress' long hair.

Monteraine shivered and bit her tongue. Voicing her annoyance would be suicidal. Instead, she continued counting the steps. By her count, she should be arriving at the bottom any moment now. That meant that a few metres below her, the walls retreated to form a large cavern, leaving the impractical staircase standing free like a pillar in its centre. She pre-emptively started hating how exposed that would leave her to the crossbowwomen stationed behind the arrow slits in the cavern walls. Dark elves or not, Monteraine doubted they would be able to correctly tell friend from foe in the light of the single torch on the bottom.

She took a deep breath shouted "Head warlock Monteraine approaching! If any bolts happen to *accidentally* fly my way, I'll make your digestive tract operate in reverse from now on!" There. She had announced herself, and now only needed to worry about being shot intentionally. Somehow, that was less reassuring than she would have liked.

"...that even mean?" a female orcish voice drifted up from below.

"...means you'd have to stuff food up your..." another woman explained, not loud enough for Monteraine to catch everything.

"Sounds like her all right," the first voice declared.

"Could you really do that?" the dark empress voice appeared in Monteraine's mind, sounding a little queasy.

"Probably," Monteraine answered, keeping her voice low. "Flipping the whole squishy mess around and reattaching the tubes and rewiring the nerves should do it," she added, more focused on getting safely down the final steps than on analysing the problem. She peered around the circular chamber, looking for the entrance to the dungeon. Even in the dark, she had no trouble finding it. Morrigan had heard of subtlety but saw little reason to apply it. He liked building big. Big rock blocks, big statues, big pillars, or in this case, a big entrance gate.

Nervously, Monteraine approached the solid metal portcullis that was at least four times her height and stared up at the balcony above it. Would acid come pouring down on her from the grate-covered openings underneath it? "Well, what are you waiting for? Let me in!"

"The door would open automatically for minions," the same female voice who had explained things to the orc commented, sounding suspicious.

Monteraine heard the sounds of crossbows being cranked, and her heart rate quickened. She could feel the mouse on her shoulder go still. "Which obviously means that I need to be re-hired, having been too close to the Master's dungeon heart when it was destroyed," she answered, managing to sound dismissive. "You *did* notice that he is currently banished, right?"

"Yeah, we aren't stupid," the unseen dark elf replied. "What happened over there, anyway?"

Monteraine shrugged. "Big explosions and vampires. It was a trap and pretty much over before we could do something about it."

"How'd you get back here, then?" the orc asked, sounding more curious than clever. "The Avatar Islands are pretty far away."

"I beat down a vampire, forced it into bat form and turned it big enough to ride," Monteraine lied easily, knowing very well that

Morrigan didn't hire minions who were knowledgeable enough to spot any of the impossibilities in that statement. She scratched her chin.

"I'm surprised that you bothered to come back at all," the dark elf said, her voice smug. "If I had as many failures under my belt, I'd have been smart enough to avoid this place."

The orc chuckled as if her companion had said something funny.

"What, and lose all of my research notes?" Monteraine shouted, crossing her arms. "That's crazy."

"Magicians. They are all screwed up in the head," the dark elf muttered.

Monteraine decided to hurt her if she got the opportunity. She was getting rather tired of talking at a door. "Enough inane questions. Take me to the heart already!" she demanded. "The Master will be expecting my report the moment he returns!"

"Gulba, start cranking," the orc ordered after a moment of silence.

"Damn, why me? You are stronger than me!" the elven woman answered.

"Exactly!" the orc replied in a tone that left no doubt that she was grinning. "Get to work!"

Judging from the declining volume of the elf woman's curses, she was moving away. A moment later, the portcullis started to rise at an agonisingly low pace.

Monteraine waited, her apprehension rising along with the gate. Her thoughts were returning again and again to her job interview an hour ago. She had managed to fast-talk herself out of trouble, but that had been more luck than planning. She lacked vital information about Mercury's quirks and pet issues. How was she supposed to lie convincingly when she didn't know what she needed to lie about in the first place? Damn it, the gate was already open.

Monteraine stepped forward, hoping desperately she wouldn't run

into any talkative acquaintances. They might say things that didn't mesh with her somewhat misleading presentation of her situation under Morrigan.

Ami hid behind Monteraine's neck from the four orcs escorting the sorceress deeper into the dungeon. With every jostling step, her paws threatened to come loose from the strap of the woman's dress, and the hair tickling Ami's nose made her want to sneeze. She suppressed the urge and kept very still, watching her environment. Through the curtain of Monteraine's long black hair, she caught glimpses of wide, artless pillars tinted orange by the light from fire pits and coal-filled pots.

"So, Monty, Julur has been rifling through your stuff while you were gone," one of the orcs said.

Ami peered at the speaker. The pinkish creature was wearing an outfit that resembled Monteraine's, made of loose strips of black cloth, but it failed to cover her chest. Perhaps she didn't see much use for modesty because Morrigan hired almost exclusively female minions? Curious about the differences between orc and human anatomy, Ami took a closer look. What she saw reminded her of an obese human male torso, but more leathery and pinker. She quickly averted her gaze from the unpleasant sight. Morrigan had some decidedly odd tastes if he forced *everyone* to dress up like that.

"I don't care. That moron isn't bright enough to do anything with it," Monteraine grumbled, frowning and keeping her gaze straight ahead.

The orc grinned and added in a teasing voice "That so? He's been crowing about how he's finally going to have your job now that he has proof-" She made a wet gurgling noise, and her white mane shook as she coughed violently, trying to clear her throat. She stopped, droplets of greenish froth shooting from her mouth. They splattered on the floor, adding the smell of vomit to the ambient aroma of sweat and burning coal.

Monteraine let the hand raised in the coughing woman's direction

drop. "Lirne, If I wanted to hear more about someone who doesn't concern me, then I would ask. Now kindly shut up, I have *important* issues to think about."

The orc wiped her lips clean and glowered. "Fuck you! I hope the Master fires you anyway for screwing up again!"

Pressed up against the sorceress' carotid, Ami could feel the woman's pulse rate spike. Her calm, superior demeanour was only a mask, then. The deception was working on the orcs, though, as they were keeping a greater distance from Monteraine. Ami was a little impressed herself. She would be hard-pressed to cast a debilitating spell that quickly even with the dungeon heart backing her up. Whatever Monteraine was hiding from Morrigan, it certainly wasn't a lack of skill. It was too bad that the orcs seemed too intimidated to continue chatting.

As the small group moved on in uneasy silence, Ami had nothing to distract herself from paying attention to her surroundings. She almost fell from Monteraine's shoulder when she spotted a crude statue - both in craftsmanship and motif. It depicted the entwined bodies of an elf and a bile demon, both unclothed. Even that short glimpse made Ami doubt that the depraved activity they were engaged in was anatomically possible, enjoyable, or even survivable.

Turning her attention to the walls only brought marginal reprieve from the tasteless deviance. The imp-made engravings had nudity and intertwined bodies too, but they were more stylized and alternated with gory battle scenes. Ami winced a little when she spotted an engraving that mixed both themes. She winced again when she remembered that her own dungeon's décor was headed in a similar direction, minus the glorification of violence. She *really* needed to stop that in its tracks. In the meantime, she kept her gaze fixated on the least offensive sights in this place. Surprisingly enough, those were the inhabitants in their barely-there outfits.

Through an open doorway, Ami could see a bunch of creatures of various races lifting weights, their skins gleaming in the light of the torches. The dark elves and humans among them certainly did have the athletic physiques required to make the oiled-up barbarian look

work. The resulting aesthetics weren't all bad, she admitted to herself. Perhaps that was an option for her own people if she wanted to make the best of a bad situation? No, most of them weren't anywhere near fit enough to wear clothes like that with dignity. She shook her head sadly, tickling Monteraine in the process and causing her to twitch. None of the guards commented on it, fortunately.

About fifteen minutes of quiet walk through winding tunnels later, the group came to a stop in a large hall. By now, Ami had resigned herself to the fact she wasn't going to learn anything useful from this expedition. She had also come to the conclusion that Morrigan's antics were to blame for the fact that people were so willing to believe any silly rumours about her supposed deviance. Oh yes, she was greatly looking forward to what she was about to do to him.

Monteraine stopped in front of what looked like a solid wall and whirled around to face her escort "Finally. Now go, fetch me a chair, a desk, paper and ink so I can begin my report, then stay here!"

"You can sit on the floor you uppity bitch! What do we look like, imps?" Lirne snapped.

"You aren't even a minion right now. You are in no position to give us orders," the largest of the pinkish women said, a little more calmly.

"I'll be again soon enough," the sorceress answered, making a dismissive gesture. "Now hurry up, I don't want to be here unprepared when the Master returns from his banishment."

"Yeah, no. You only want a few warm bodies between you and his anger when he arrives. We are out of here! Have fun! Not!"

"Shouldn't we keep an eye on her?" the smallest of the orcs asked as the other three moved toward the stone archway leading out.

The largest orc stopped. "Yes, clearly she's going to dig through sixteen cubits of near-indestructible rock, avoid the alarms, and

attack the dungeon heart by herself, all without anybody noticing," she said sneering. "Just to be clear, that means 'no', 'you are a moron', and 'that's *their* job'." She pointed up at a crenellated balcony.

Ami followed the pointed digit and spotted two dark elves standing motionless in the shadows.

"You don't have to be an arsehole about it!" the cautious orc complained as she hurried after the others.

Monteraine leaned against the wall, facing away from the guards on the balcony, and waited in silence. A few minutes after the footsteps of the orcs had faded in the distance, she asked in a barely audible whisper "Now what, your Imperial Majesty? We are as alone as we are going to get."

Ami had already been told that Morrigan's protections for his dungeon heart were as simplistic as they were effective. Sticking with his preferences, he had built big. The wall Monteraine was leaning against was actually a gate the size and volume of a small house, fortified by imps. As if that wasn't enough, seven metal clamps locked it in place, each one operated by a lever in a different and remote part of the dungeon. Unfortunately, Morrigan hadn't neglected to make the rest of the walls just as solid as the entrance. The dungeon heart itself, directly behind the gate, prevented spellcasting or teleportation into its chamber. All in all, the security measures would successfully prevent forceful intrusion until help could arrive.

"We break in," Ami answered telepathically. *"First, I will have to neutralise the guards."*

"Please do remember that alarms will go off if someone who isn't meant to be here touches the ground," Monteraine whispered back.

"Thanks for the reminder. Please hold me so I don't fall," Ami requested. *"I'll need my front paws free for this."*

Monteraine grabbed the mouse on her shoulder, making it look as if she was brushing through her hair. She interposed her body

between herself and the rodent, helping the latter to stand on its hind legs by holding it up with two fingers.

Ami's whiskers twitched as she concentrated and moved her forelegs through the air. Casting a spell undetected was difficult enough when you had the appropriate limbs. Proceeding cautiously, she projected an energy-draining spell at the dark elves, going slowly and alternating between the two.

It didn't take long for the first of the white-skinned women to lean heavily on the crenelations. The other was in no shape to notice, as she was unable to keep her eyes eyelids from closing.

Ami intensified the drain, and the albinos slumped over in quick succession. *"The guards are unconscious,"* she informed Monteraine. *"I am going to create an imp. Stand ready to catch her."*

A flash of green motes later, the sorceress staggered from the impact of a coverall-clad large-eyed creature landing in her arms.

The imp giggled as Ami raced up Monteraine's arm, ordered the mouse to stay put, and turned into an arc of black lightning. She struck the worker between her bulbous black eyes, which lit up with a red light.

The imp flashed blue for an instant, and Monteraine blinked repeatedly. Her mouth opened half-way as she stared at the tiara, the black leotard, and the extremely short blue skirt the imp was now wearing.

"Shabon Spray Freezing!" Ami said in a low, squeaky voice, thrusting her three-fingered hands towards the ground. With the stream of fog-filled bubbles that shot from her palms, she coated the floor in a thin layer of ice. Belatedly, she noticed that she had not needed to cast the spell slowly to gather the required power. "It should be safe to let me down now, since I won't be touching the ground directly," she said.

Monteraine complied a little too quickly, almost dropping Ami. "I am eager to see how we are going to get past the defences, your Majesty," she whispered, leaning in closer. "Preferably without

alerting announcing your presence to the rest of the dungeon," she added, looking over her shoulder at the doorway.

Ami summoned her visor and observed the metal clamps hidden within the rock. "I think it will be easiest to just open the door the way it is meant to open, more or less," she answered. "Please retreat to the far wall for your own safety."

Monteraine obeyed without hesitation, not taking her eyes off Ami as she created a large metal bar with her fabrication spell and levitated it in front of herself.

Ami used a second instance of the spell to wrap the bar with coil. Now she only needed to add a little Keeper lightning and she had a workable electromagnet. Just like- eek!

Startled, Ami jumped back and slipped on the ice when something struck her magnet with a loud clang. The dark elves' crossbow bolts, she realised as she picked herself off the floor. With bated breath, she listened for approaching footsteps or cries of alarm, but everything remained silent. Phew. She risked returning to work, directing an encouraging smile at the pale Monteraine.

With the aid of her visor, she tracked the first clamp inside the rock while she manipulated it with her magnet. Click. Easy enough. She was vaguely aware of Monteraine craning her neck and frowning as she watched, a baffled expression on her face. It quickly turned to amazement as six more clicks followed the first one in rapid succession, indicating that the clamps were loose.

"Your Majesty, that was amazing! What kind of unlocking wand can work that close to a dungeon heart?"

"Later," Ami said, dismissing the conjured object and dissolving it into a storm of green sparks. "That large wheel over there is what the minions use to lift the gate?" She pointed at a round, horizontal contraption that had many grips sticking out at waist height.

"Indeed, Empress. It takes almost half of the dungeon's inhabitants to turn it. Even Morrigan's Keeper power is too weak by itself," she pointed out.

"That's helpful to know," Ami muttered. Undeterred, she summoned fog and condensed it into a Keeper hand. Missing strength could be compensated for by using pulleys and counterweights, which were only a few fabrication spells away.

Monteraine watched the possessed imp work, alternating between gaping and frowning. "This... this is not what I expected," she commented when the wheel slowly creaked into motion, pulled by the frozen Keeper hand and an assortment of hastily-conjured tools. "It's ingenious but mundane."

"It works and it's subtle," Ami answered while the heavy gate rose millimetre by millimetre. She stopped when the gap underneath it was high enough to accommodate an imp. Again, she froze the ground to circumvent the alarms, and then created another imp.

The creature held out an open bag in front of Ami, who moved her hands over the opening. Dark-coloured dust trickled into the container, rapidly filling it. Once it was full, the imp hurried through the tunnel to the enemy dungeon heart, emptied the sack into its pit, and returned.

Monteraine watched the imp come and go several times before she approached, the ice under her feet cracking slightly. "May I ask what you are doing, your Majesty?"

"Are you familiar with black powder?" Ami answered.

"One of the many means alchemists blow themselves up with, yes," Monteraine confirmed, glancing at the empty bag of the returning imp. "Oh." She took a step back from the creature. "I suppose that will work, in sufficient amounts." She backed off a little further.

"Exactly." Ami shook her head at the imp when the servant waited for her with the empty sack again. "No, we are done here."

"We are?" Monteraine asked, raising an eyebrow as Ami started dissolving her conjured tools.

"Yes." Ami closed her eyes and mentally called out to the youma Umbra back at her home base. *"You have been tracking us,*

correct? Bring the body, but don't touch the ground."

A pillar of darkness appeared in the room just as the gate leading to Morrigan's dungeon heart slammed shut, causing Monteraine to jump. "She's here to transport us back?" she asked when Umbra, wrapped in her customary robes, appeared from the fading column of shadows. It took the sorceress a moment to spot the burnt human figure the youma was carrying. "Is that supposed to be *me*?"

Ami nodded, sickened by the smell of burnt flesh despite knowing that it wasn't real. She quickly looked away. The corpse was a duplicate of herself, made with the same glamour spell she had used to trick Crowned Death. Wearing a replica of Monteraine's dress and then burned beyond recognition, it should keep the locals distracted with a murder mystery long enough that the rest of Ami's plan could fall into place.

"A bit short if that is supposed to be me," Monteraine noted. "Though I suppose the orcs are dumb enough to miss that detail. I confess that I'm still a little confused as to why you didn't destroy the dungeon yet?"

"There is a lightning trap down there with the black powder," Ami explained. "Once the heart starts beating again-"

"Boom. That's brilliant," Monteraine finished, clapping her hands. "The moment Morrigan returns, he is banished once more, and there's nothing he can do about it. You might even kill him if he reappears at this particular heart! How delightfully spiteful, your Majesty!"

"It will keep him out of my way for a while longer, in any case," Ami answered. Hopefully, she would be able to deal the time gained to deal with some of the other issues plaguing her. Issues that were more pressing than attacking his better-defended dungeons. "Now, Monteraine, since your information was good, I will hold up my end of the bargain and hire you. I think I even have a project where your particular skills will come in useful. Umbra, teleport us home!"

Monteraine stared at her so-called research assistant, wondering if the Dark Empress was still testing her.

Noticing her attention, the tentacle monster waved a few of its appendages.

"You are the one who has experience with hybridization and body parts attached to unusual places?" she verified, staring straight into two of the creature's eyes.

"I'm afraid so," Tserk answered. *"Uncomfortable, personal experience."*

Monteraine sighed and stomped on a tentacle that had been snaking in her direction. "You will have to tell me all about it in exhaustive detail. Later." Her gaze came to rest on a row of cages filled with rats. She sighed again. "For now, make yourself useful and start shaving the test subjects."

Unexpected Visitors (DARK)

Originally on 2013-08-31T17:10:00

Dolzene threw herself flat to the ground and grunted when her chin hit the rock. A spiny, hook-covered limb whipped through the space she had just occupied, passing close enough that she could feel the air moving in its wake. Pushing with one arm, she flipped herself on her side and pointed her free hand at the monstrosity looming over her, twice as tall as she was. Her open palm glowed blue as she *lifted*, and the beast's four hind legs lost contact with the ground.Unable to advance, the scaled monster reached for her, multi-jointed limbs flailing and grasping.

Dolzene crawled backwards, the arm pointing at her attacker wavering under the strain of keeping the heavy creature afloat. "Kuzza, kill it! Kill it before it spits acid! Kuzza!" she shouted, her voice shrill and high-pitched. Still backing away, she risked a brief glance over her shoulder, searching for the other youma. Finger-long insect remains dotted the landscape like glowing coals, burning with a ghostly white flame. "Damn it, Kuzza, hurry!"

A head with green flame for hair popped out from a ditch behind Dolzene. "I can't! The big ones don't burn!" Kuzza complained, her wide-open eyes never lingering on one point for more than an instant.

Dolzene cursed. "Then get up there and hit it with a rock!" she jerked her head in the direction of the cliff face looming behind them. Above it, endless flashes of lightning illuminated a buzzing black cloud that blotted out the sky.

Kuzza looked upwards, her expression dubious. One of the dead insects raining like embers from above almost hit her in the eye. Flinching, she ducked and created a white-glowing sphere between her hands. She jumped, her mineral skin gleaming almost exactly like the shells of the invaders in the light of the humming sphere at her side. Like the spells already up in the air, it lashed any bug that

got too close with lightning. Protected by the crackling sphere, Kuzza squatted down next to a boulder and wrapped her arms around it. Grunting with effort, she heaved it up to chest height, spun around her own axis for momentum, and hurled it down the cliff.

The plummeting boulder would miss, Dolzene realized. The muscles in her arm screamed in pain as she yanked it to the side, dragging the levitating monstrosity into the path of the falling boulder.

With a resounding crack, the rock struck the hunching monster's neck. Shell fragments went flying, and the creature's head came off as if hit by a guillotine. Slumping, the body crashed to the ground.

Dolzene hadn't aimed for the neck, but she wasn't questioning the bout of good luck. She turned away from the grotesque corpse when she heard Kuzza land at her side.

"I got stung," the other youma complained, rubbing her thigh.

"And I almost dislocated my shoulder," Dolzene shot right back, scanning the battlefield. "Did you see anything coming our way while you were up there?"

"The big slimy thing near Geldra's cave is dragging itself this way," Kuzza reported.

"You said it was dead!"

"Looked dead to me!"

"We need to- "

A shadow fell over them. Something huge that resembled a cross between a shark and a centipede descended through the insect cloud, pushing apart the wall of bug-zapping spheres. It bucked and jerked, twisting into pretzel-like shapes, yellow ichor seeping from gashes in its carapace.

On the creature's back, anchored between two segments of the elongated body, a tall youma swung her two-handed sword. The blade left a glowing after-image in the air that expanded outwards and cut deeply into the monster's body.

"Hack it to pieces, Umuk!" Kuzza cheered as three leg-shaped fins tumbled to the ground.

The ground shook. It shook way too much for the vibrations to have resulted from the impacts. Eyes widening, Dolzene grabbed Kuzza's arm and pulled. "RUN! It's that fucking worm again!"

Behind them, a set of pincers large enough to pinch someone in half exploded from the cliff face. Rubble and dust parted like water as a skeletal, snake-like form shot from its tunnel and headed straight for the fleeing youma. On the creature's back, a large blister inflated with a hissing noise.

Kuzza lunged, tackling Dolzene to the ground mid-sprint. She didn't let go until the two of them had rolled behind the cover of a crumbled wall.

A wall of flying darts swept past them, rattling their cover with a staccato of impacts and cutting of Dolzene's protest. "Gah. Didn't think it would try that so soon." She listened but could no longer hear the noise of pebbles being ground into dust under the worm's slithering advance.

"It stopped?" Kuzza asked, surprised. On all fours, she moved to peek past the wall. "They are all staring at the sky!"

Still on her back, Dolzene had a good view of the swarm above going still. As if reacting to an unseen signal, it suddenly resumed motion, ascending at a rapid pace.

"What's going on? Can you feel that?" Kuzza asked, her voice low.

Dolzene nodded. There was a heavy, charged quality to the air that grew stronger with every passing second. It felt familiar, like something that she had always perceived on an unconscious level being amplified far beyond normal. Eyes widening, she turned towards the settlement's source of dark magic. "Kuzza, the spring!"

The Great Ruler's power was fountaining from the crevasses, gathering into a bubbling, upwards-flowing stream. It scattered the insect cloud as it passed through, and Dolzene could just make out

four figures floating high, high above them. At this distance, she could only distinguish the barest details, but that was enough. The sheer power gathering around the group left no doubt about the identity of its tallest member.

"The Queen!" Kuzza said in an awed whisper. "We are saved!"

Nephrite hovered near Queen Beryl, far more interested in the landscape than in watching his displeased monarch. She really needn't have bothered coming all the way out here only to stare into her crystal ball the whole time. Not that he intended to voice that thought. None of the dark generals were currently in her good graces.

His gaze wandered to the irregular cloud that towered on the horizon like a setting black sun. Hidden underneath, the hijacked portal was spewing out more invaders. From up here, it looked as if trails of ants were marching forth into the countryside. Bored, Nephrite checked if Queen Beryl's expression had changed in the meantime. Nope. Her face remained frozen in a disdainful frown, lips pressed tightly together. What was so interesting about that crystal ball anyway?

He peered at the black orb and saw two youma sprinting. Queen Beryl's fingers moved, and the image changed. It now showed another youma, writhing and screaming soundlessly as the invaders devoured her alive, starting from her extremities.

Nephrite looked away.

"They are so pitifully weak," Zoisite said, pursing his lips. "Those things are doing us a favour, cleaning out the incompetents."

Queen Beryl glanced at him sideways, moving only her eyes. Her look spoke volumes, but Zoisite didn't pick up on that, the fool.

"I am not concerned about the situation," Kunzite said in a firm, almost bored voice. That successfully drew the Queen's attention away from the younger general, but it meant that he was now the

target of her piercing stare. "The enemies are no match for all but your weakest youma," he elaborated. "They are large but uncoordinated. Little more than beasts."

"There are a whole lot of them," Nephrite couldn't help point out, "and they are smart enough to head towards more populated areas."

Kunzite turned to face him, his cape fluttering. "Which is exactly how we are going to draw them into a trap and offer their energy to our Great Ruler."

Queen Beryl showed no outward sign that she had heard the white-haired general, causing his superior smirk to fade away a little.

Nephrite, while amused to see his senior general ignored, felt that he needed to contribute to show off his worth. "In the meantime, we can use this external threat to promote greater unity in your Kingdom. In times of war, the dissenters disgruntled by recent security measures will be seen as the traitors they are."

"Vermin," Queen Beryl snarled, voice dripping with disdain. The orb-tipped staff floating before her flared white.

Nephrite flinched away, fearing for his life as he stared into the glare.

Kunzite and Zoisite looked similarly alarmed, backing off as more and more power gathered within the crystal sphere. Tendrils of magic rose like black threads from the surrounding landscape, flowing towards the orb.

Beryl wasn't looking at them, Nephrite realised. Her hair stood upright, dancing like a candle flame around her head, which was facing the battle on the ground.

In the small valley below, the fighting stopped. Nephrite could see dark forms starting to ascend towards him.

Beryl pointed her staff in their direction and launched the ball of darkness that had formed at its tip. The spell moved downwards at a constant rate, white light spilling from cracks in its surface. The sphere grew in size as it fell, which made its descent look slower

than it really was.

"I want them dealt with," Beryl stated, her orange eyes narrowed. "Handle it!" Without waiting for an answer, she turned on her heel and faded from sight.

Nephrite stared at the spot she had just vacated. He wished she had been a little more specific about how she wanted them to 'handle' the situation. Or that she had at least thrown her tantrum at the portal instead.

A bright flash from below illuminated the landscape as the explosion swallowed the contested valley.

Up on the stage, Ami sat on a simple throne, her fingers digging into its armrests as she looked at the five large tables in the hall before her. Soon, they would be filled with people, all staring up at her. She touched her collar, willing her thin, semi-transparent cloak to stay closed. Underneath, she was wearing what Jadeite had jokingly referred to as a 'formal bikini', a tiny black thing decorated with gold trim and hexagons that resembled snow flakes.

The dark general himself was wearing shorts that looked like someone had spilled sticky black oil on him, going so far as modelling fake droplets trickling down his legs. His upper body remained bare, showing off his well-defined muscles and -

Ami gulped and managed to tear her gaze away before he could notice her stare. Jered was safer to look at, not that his Ancient Egyptian-looking loincloth hid much more than Jadeite's outfit. She simply wasn't interested in him that way.

On the other side of Ami's throne stood her female moral support. Venna was wrapped in a numerous interconnected leather belts, something that she had picked for herself. It showed even more skin than Ami's outfit, but the dark elf wore it with the same carefree, confident attitude as if she had been covered head to toe in full plate armour.

Somewhat guiltily, Ami hoped the dark elf's smooth white skin and voluptuous curves would draw most attention away from her. For the last member of her entourage, she had played with the thought of just bringing Isolda. However, a dark mistress who was terrified of her would in no way reassure her audience. Instead, she had decided to go with someone else who was guaranteed to draw attention.

Landra, the last youma Jadeite had rescued from Eternal Sleep, was on the very bottom of youma power scale, having nothing but enhanced strength and speed to her name. She was also fairly good-looking by human standards, resembling an elf who was trying to disguise herself as a goblin. Wearing a back-free dress that went to mid thigh, she was the most conservatively dressed female up on the stage. Nevertheless, her green skin, button-like purple eyes, and cyan-coloured hair were exotic features that would distract from Ami.

"I'm calling them in now," she said, having prepared herself mentally as much as she could. Before she could lose her courage, she remotely opened the doors at the other end of the hall.

Civilians waiting in five orderly lines filed into the room. They moved smoothly at first, but steps faltered as the people in the front row saw what was waiting for them inside the room.

Ami saw a well-muscled man's mouth fall open as his eyes widened, and he missed a step before he averted his eyes. A younger man, looking to be in his twenties, turned red like a tomato and stopped until someone bumped into him. To the right, an older woman made a face as if she had just bitten into a lemon and glared at everyone on the stage, while a younger one went pale as a sheet.

Despite the initial hesitation, people quickly found the right colour-coded tables and moved toward them as protocol demanded. Soon enough, a hundred pale and worried face were looking at Ami, displaying various degrees of anger, embarrassment, and disgust.

Ami noted that the civilian's clothes were already suffering from initial stages of corruption, and winced in sympathy. Showing up to the audience wearing tattered, discoloured rags had to make her guests even more apprehensive than they would usually be.

Jadeite raised his hand, and the civilians bowed deeply on his signal.

"At ease," Ami spoke up. Her voice sounded weak to even her, and she resolved to continue louder. "Please, have a seat." She rose and approached the front of the raised stage, her cloak opening slightly from the movement. Even though she knew her top covered everything important, feeling a breeze brush the underside of her breasts through its gauzy parts made her want to flee the stage. It didn't help that a boy about her own age was most definitely not gaping at her face.

Ami made an obelisk-shaped podium rise before her and tried not to give the impression that she was hiding behind it. "First, I gathered you here because I need your skills as craftsmen," she began. A good start, as she saw some of her guests relax marginally. "In an effort to get to the heart of the matter quickly, I won't mince words. The contamination that forced us out of the Avatar Islands is causing another issue."

A faint murmur rose from the crowd as people sucked in breaths and turned even paler.

"It's not dangerous!" Ami hurried to add, raising her hands in a placating gesture. "It's, um offensive and inconvenient, but nobody is in danger. It may look as if things are falling apart," she gestured vaguely in the direction of their clothes, "but they aren't. That's not what's happening. Not exactly. Non-living objects are being remodelled so that they look more pleasing to the dark gods. Meaning obscene and unacceptable."

Ami noticed a renewed interest in the apparel of the people on stage and wondered if her audience hadn't gotten the wrong impression.

"To clarify, our outfits are *not* the end result of this process. I, um, don't like them much, but they were designed specifically to prevent even worse!" Great, now she sounded as if she was trying to justify herself. Perhaps she should backtrack a little. "What I was about to say is, the changes can be prevented by purposefully designing items along certain aesthetics. Which is where I hope your combined skills will be able to help."

A large man at the closest table raised his hand.

"Yes?"

"Your Imperial Majesty, am I understanding correctly that everyone will have to dress like that?" he asked, pointing at Ami's employees up on the stage.

"W-well yes, I'm afraid so," Ami confirmed, unhappy that she hadn't been able to soften the blow first.

This time, the murmur around the tables was a bit louder, and she saw frowns and downright rebellious faces. A fat man with a large moustache groaned, and one of the women even started crying.

Ami cringed, feeling terrible. "There's still hope you can come up with more acceptable designs that work!" she tried to comfort her listeners. Perhaps she should have started off with her presentation instead? None of this was raising her confidence in her public speaking skills.

"...yes, waterfalls could hide unwanted elements," the voice of the dark empress drifted over from two tables away. "I think it's a good idea. If you could sketch something, then I could test it right away."

Kevan didn't recognise the architect she was talking to, since most of the people in this room were strangers. The one exception was his son and apprentice Kellen, sitting next to him at the table. Most of its other occupants were currently walking around the hall, inspecting a variety of partial rooms that the dark empress had created. It made a honest mason's gall rise to see her build with the wave of a hand what he and his boy would need days to construct. That wasn't the reason he wasn't participating, though. He worked according to other people's plans, he didn't make them.

The dark empress was approaching, but stopped at a closer table and joined a discussion about flowers, and how they were technically plant genitals. Ugh. Leave it to a Keeper to even ruin looking at pure and innocent things. One of her hands moved

towards her midriff, but stopped mid-motion and dropped down again. It looked as if she had been about to pull her cloak shut, almost as if she was embarrassed by her attire.

As if people wouldn't be able to see right through the flimsy thing anyway, Kevan thought. Who was she trying to fool? With her reputation, she couldn't be concerned about decency or the dignity of her extorted title. Still, she moved with her shoulders tucked in as if she wanted to cover herself, and her voice lacked confidence. Perhaps she had been saying the truth about not liking this any more than they did?

Kevan looked at his son and found him occupied with sneaking poorly-concealed glances at the empress' backside. He kicked the boy's foot in alarm and whispered "Eyes front!"

Kellen twitched and suddenly seemed to find the surface of the table fascinating.

As the boy's ears turned red, Kevan started sweating. Stupid boy, didn't he consider what could have happened if she had caught him staring? You'd think he didn't have even half a working brain. When Kevan was at that age he would never have - never have passed up an opportunity to ogle a girl dressed like that, he realised with a sinking feeling. Was the demon empress enacting an elaborate plan to corrupt the youth here? He watched her more closely.

"... shift the context in which way?" she asked, smiling faintly at a leatherworker.

The elderly man failed to meet her eyes. "Well, rather than emphasizing the fertility of the wearer, one could show things living off the wearer. Parasite fertility."

Empress Mercury grimaced and turned green, apparently suffering from a vivid imagination. "That, er, yes," she began lamely, "that could work. It would be in line with evil aesthetics, at least. Thank you for the idea. Perhaps you could come up with some preliminary ideas?"

She didn't sound any more enthusiastic about the suggestion than

Kevan felt, thankfully. He could live without ever seeing anything prominently featuring tapeworms as part of its design. Shaking his head, he returned to his suspicions. There were many teenagers among the captives, having been too convinced of their own invincibility to do the smart thing and flee when the undead came. Like Kellen. He loved the boy dearly but wished he had gotten away with Sophia. Light, children that age were dumb.

Kevan briefly longed for his absent wife before further dissecting the problem. Boys and girls too hooked on depravity to integrate into decent society would grow up as loyal minions for the dark empress by default. If she wanted citizens that were truly *hers*, serving even without the threat of blindness hanging over their head, then sullying their morals would be the way to start.

The mason closed his eyes, wishing his conclusions would go away. Short of protecting Kellen, there was not much he could do about them. Except - yes. Despite the danger, he would do his duty as a good patriot, write down his suspicions in his journal, and leave it open where the voice in his head told him to.

Ami closed the door and let herself sink against it while releasing a long, relieved breath. Finally! That was finally over! Her cheeks coloured as she wrapped her cloak tightly around herself. Her strategy of fighting down her embarrassment by likening her situation to participating in a public swimming competition had only been partially successful. The main flaw was that she had never owned any swimsuits this racy. She felt a pang of homesickness, but the prospect of changing into something more modest cheered her right up again.

"Your Majesty!" Torian's voice called from the end of the corridor, stopping her before she could teleport to her chambers.

"Yes?" She spotted her head warlock getting up from a bench and looking in her direction. He took a step towards her, only to jump back with a startled cry. A roaring blast of flame barred his path, casting orange light over the corridor.

The stream of fire cut off, and a rumbling voice declared "We had agreed that I would go first!" From around the bend, the large reptilian head of the speaker appeared, blocking Ami's view of Torian's face.

"Unilateral agreements are invalid! Know your place!" Torian shouted, bringing his jewel-tipped staff down on the dragon's skull. Blue sparks flew from the impact, and the creature's head dipped downwards. "Back, uppity lizard! Back!"

Ami blinked at the sight, wondering if she needed to interfere. She didn't remember hiring a dragon, but its minion bond was in place. Hopefully, her advisers had kept accurate records of everything they had let in while she was distracted.

Torian stepped past his dazed opponent. "Sorry about that, your Majesty," he said, shaking his head. "New recruits. Now, I have-"

That was as far as he got before the dragon growled and swung his snout against the warlock's shoulder.

Tossed aside like a rag doll, Torian stumbled into the wall. Before he could catch his balance, the dragon scrambled fully into the corridor, using the bulk of his scaly body to pin the warlock against the wall.

"No fighting!" Ami ordered, overcoming her surprise.

"I am merely expressing my affection. Like a cat," the dragon stated as it leaned against Torian and brushed past him.

Sharp scales bit into the warlocks robe with ripping noises, and he gasped for breath.

"Stop it! Right now!" Ami shouted, scowling and crossing her arms.

"Oh very well, Keeper," the dragon rumbled, sounding disappointed. "Or do you prefer *Empress now?*" He backed away from Torian and sat down.

"I do," Ami confirmed. The term had less unfortunate associations than 'Keeper', and she needed any advantage she could get. She spared a worried glance at Torian, who was on all fours and

wheezing, but seemed uninjured.

"Then I shall address you as *Majesty* from now on, Keeper," the dragon drawled.

Satisfied that Torian didn't need medical help, Ami inspected the dragon more closely. She recognised the patterns around his mouth and realised why he seemed so familiar: he was her old sparring partner! While not all of her memories about him were happy ones - being covered in dragon drool came to mind - she was, on the whole, glad to have him back. Spirits lifted enough to ignore the little brawl, she said "Welcome back. You wanted to talk to me?"

"Yes, I need your permission to use your treasury as my lair," he answered, his tail writhing like an excited snake.

Ami considered the request. She didn't really have a problem with a dragon guarding her gold, but... "*That* was urgent enough to shove my head warlock aside for?" she asked, frowning.

"Naturally. I had to get to you before the other dragons can."

"What other dragons?" Calling upon her dungeon heart, Ami checked if she had somehow managed to miss more than one dragon joining her forces. She had not.

"The news that you moved crates upon crates of gems to your dungeon is spreading like a wildfire through the Underworld. It is only a matter of time until they arrive, looking for a seizable hoard to nest on," the dragon replied.

"I- right," Ami said quietly, still digesting the notion that the rumour mill could be working in her favour for once. Dragons were comparatively unproblematic creatures, in her limited experience, though she might have to expand a few corridors. She nodded and smiled briefly. "Well, I see no immediate reason to deny your request, so you can go ahead."

"Thank you. I will be off furnishing my new home." In a display of agility that had Torian ducking for cover, the dragon wriggled until he had turned around in the empty corridor.

"A disrespectful beast," Torian grumbled as his opponent stomped off. His scowl deepened as he brushed the dust from the tatters of his robe. He mumbled a quick spell that patched the gashes in his robe with stiff, bone-like plates. His expression changed into a servile smile as he faced Ami. "In any case, I have news that may be of interest to you, your Majesty. A lesser Keeper than you might even find them concerning."

"Go on?" Ami encouraged, her arms crossed over her chest. She felt insecure in her thin cloak, and the warlock's words weren't exactly raising her expectaions.

"The subordinates you set to the task of contacting the Avatar," he furrowed his brow for a moment, "were successful. For a certain value of success. Snyder seemed less than pleased when the Avatar covered his crystal ball after the words, I quote," Torian distorted his face into a haughty sneer and continued in a mocking imitation of the Avatar's voice "I have nothing to say to you or your Empress!"

"That is somewhat concerning, yes," Ami agreed, trying not to show her disappointment. Inwardly, she was yelling in frustration. Why did he always have to make things so difficult? So many problems could be solved by just talking about them!

Torian scratched the back of his head. "Well, it is certainly unwise of him to ignore his betters, but I was talking more about the fact that he's here in Nimbadnur."

Ami felt as if she had been punched in the gut. He was *here*? She hadn't done anything that warranted him coming after her! Yes, she was no longer on the Avatar Islands, but he had to know that wasn't by choice. The Light Gods had even helped her escape! She bit her lip. That actually made the situation worse, since they would know exactly where to find her current dungeon. What happened to keeping to the spirit of the agreement? She wasn't going to hurt anyone! There had to be more worthwhile uses of the Avatar's time than sealing her away!

Ami forced herself to breathe normally. She didn't know for certain that he was going to attack her. His refusal to talk to her didn't bode

well, but it wasn't irrefutable proof that he was here for her. She needed to confirm his precise location, the disposition of his forces, and, most importantly, she needed to get answers out of him. If he declined to communicate by crystal ball, then she would have to send messengers instead. Preferably someone whom the dwarfs wouldn't immediately throw into prison for associating with her.

"Torian. Inform the fairies that I want to see them in my study as soon as possible," she said after going over the short list of potential candidates.

"As you wish, my Empress," the warlock replied, inclining his head.

Ami transported him close to the guest housing and considered her immediate next steps. Caution demanded that she assumed the Avatar to be hostile, so she needed to fortify her dungeon further. If its location was no longer secret, then she could sacrifice secrecy for improved defensibility. If not - well, she would have to figure out if that was the case and then evaluate her options.

A warm breeze made her cloak billow, and she looked down at her bare legs. She would ponder that problem while changing into clothes more suited for a diplomatic meeting, she decided.

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Frenzied Fortification

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Ami sat alone on her side of the long table, pleading her case to the seven fairies sitting across from her. "I'm more than willing to pay the dwarfs for the land I'm using, but I don't *have* any negotiators I could send aside from you," she said. "The dwarfs won't listen to anyone associated with a Keeper. You are diplomats from a third party, they will have to at least hear you out!"

"Before they lock us up and throw away the key," the redhead sitting furthest from Ami muttered under her breath. She was looking dishevelled and had dark rings under her eyes.

"If I may, your Majesty?" Dandel, the oldest of the fairy sisters, raised her hand. "Ordering an ambassador from an independent nation to act as your messenger is highly irregular," The indigo-haired fairy had yet to touch the steaming cup of tea before her.

"But it's not forbidden either, right?" Ami asked, turning to her. "You wouldn't get into trouble if you did this for me?"

"Technically, if we went travelling while we were supposed to be here, we could be accused of dereliction of duty," Cerasse pointed out, demonstrating that she was paying attention despite being busy arranging cookie crumbs in a neat circle.

"That would mean someone had to replace us, and I can't think of anyone who would want the job," Tilia commented. Arms crossed behind her head, she was leaning back so far with her chair that Ami expected her to tip over any moment now. The fairy's emerald eyes suddenly went wide as her brain caught up with her mouth. "No offence intended, your Imperial Majesty!" she added in a hurry, sitting down straighter.

"We could ask for permission," Roselle suggested.

Ami smiled gratefully at the orange-haired girl. "Could you perhaps

do so while on the move?" she asked, worried about additional delays. "The dwarfs are coming here *now*!" She had been dismayed to see how many soldiers were moving through the gates of the closest towns, both arriving from the nearest villages and departing in the general direction of her dungeon.

"I'm a little sceptical about getting authorization to act on your behalf," Dandel cautioned.

"People could die needlessly, and not just because they are forcing me to defend myself!" Ami said, looking directly into Ambassador Camilla's eyes. "Nomadic orcs live in the mountains. Look!" A map appeared before her and dropped onto the table. It wasn't as good as what she could have produced using her computer, but her employees had done accurate enough work.

The fairies leaned forward, even Anise curious enough to stop attempting to burn holes into Ami with her glower. She had been doing that ever since catching a glimpse of Ami's imitation uniform when her cloak had opened a little.

"We are here," Ami indicated one particular mountain with little regard for secrecy, since the dwarfs already knew where to find her. "Here, here and here," she indicated thick red dots to the west, south-west, and north-east of her dungeon, "are the major towns in the area." Initially, they had looked about three days of travel away from her location, but the dwarfs were crossing the mountainous terrain faster than she had anticipated.

"The map looks really empty," Camilla noted, her gaze darting from one blank area to the next.

"Most of it is mountains and wilderness," Ami explained, "with the dwarfs preferring to settle in the valleys." She gestured at the sparse small dots in the narrow green-coloured zones of the map. Her voice grew more concerned. "Since most soldiers are gathering at the towns for a strike against me, they can't protect all those villages. I don't want them to find their homes pillaged and their loved ones dead when they get back!"

Camilla's fingers whitened as she gripped her teacup tighter, and

she looked at her sisters for help.

"Empress, can't you just hire the orcs and keep them under control?" Melissa suggested, tilting her head to the side.

"I already have people trying to track down and contact the different clans," Ami answered, "but they are hard to find. Please, talk to the dwarfs for me! Do you really want to stand by idly when you could prevent much unnecessary misery, Ambassador?"

The blonde swallowed and inclined her head with a sigh. "Fine. We'll do it."

Her sisters didn't look happy, but they did they contradict her.

"Thank you so much!" Ami stood with a brilliant smile. "I don't want to sound pushy, but could you please get ready to depart as soon as possible?" She felt her cheeks flush a little, feeling uncomfortably about being so insistent. Unfortunately, she had a lot of work waiting for her.

"Can we keep the map?" the green-haired fairy asked as she and her sisters got up.

Ami hesitated. "Yes, but it would be easier if you simply flew west until you found the river and then followed it to the town downstream. It's not the closest one, but you also won't lose time getting lost. "

"Hey, we aren't that bad!" Anise snapped.

Ami raised her hands. "I didn't mean to imply that. While using the crystal ball, I noticed that mountains are hard to recognise from above, and I can't imagine it getting any simpler when you are travelling between them. Now excuse me please," she bowed, "but I really have to return to my preparations."

Ami sat in the centre of an ever-expanding pile of discarded papers and sketches, alternating between jotting down notes, staring blankly into space, and shouting short, precise instructions. To her

left, a sandwich missing only a single bite hid underneath a few pages of schematics, and a little further away, her lunch had been lost under a paper avalanche. The imps that would normally have cleaned up around her were busy elsewhere in the dungeon.

"Your Majesty," an unkempt man with large earrings said as he approached Ami's raised platform, "three more warlocks have collapsed."

Ami twitched and looked up from her work. Her command centre was arranged like an upside-down, hollow step pyramid, with each floor easily visible from her elevated position. She shook her aching fingers as her gaze swept over the stair-like ranks, quickly locating a row of blank mirrors, with three hunched-over bodies on the chairs before them. Mana exhaustion from having to suddenly power the devices from their own reserves was the most likely cause of their unconsciousness. "I'll fix it in a moment," she said, transporting the unconscious figures to the infirmary. "Torian!" she called, looking down from her perch. "Are the rainfall configurations done yet?"

The warlock working on the lowest and closest floor glanced up from his wet desk, sweating. "Very soon, your Majesty! Very soon!" he assured her with a smile that bared his gleaming white teeth. "In the meantime, I have mitigated some load on the system by having your dragons power your smelters instead!"

Ami's Keeper sight showed her the forges, and she quickly spotted the two dragons breathing fire into the furnaces. Goblins with a small pot full of molten metal crawled over them, coating the dragons' scales with a layer of molten steel.

"I see." Ami approved of the power savings, even if it meant she'd have to take into account the changed loads. "Good initiative, but I really need the adjustments as soon as possible," she told him. "I'd do them myself if I could delegate the dungeon expansion instead."

"Understood, my Empress," Torian confirmed.

Ami wished she still had the near-surface heat sources that made geothermal power so practical on the Avatar islands. Here, she had a few windmills, which were currently hooked up to her gem

furnaces. The rest of her electricity came from water-powered turbines. Water that ran down the mountainside courtesy of the corruption she had let loose on the surface when she learned that the dwarfs were coming. Now if only it would stop giving her snow or hail instead of rain occasionally, thereby causing unpredictable fluctuations in her power grid. That would be much easier on the rats claiming surface terrain for her as fast as they could too.

"Empress Mercury, we have to talk!" Cathy called out loudly as she stalked into the room, surrounded by a swarm of excited goblins. The brushes and paint buckets they were holding did not bode well for anyone. When the blonde stopped, they began - or rather continued - doodling on her armour.

"Those, um, drawings..." Ami began, staring at Cathy's armour. With a lot of imagination, she could make out distorted worms, centipedes, and ticks. The parasites were too crudely drawn to look really disturbing, at least.

"Yeah, well, I figure it's better than getting distracted in the middle of the battle by my breastplate suddenly deciding that it should really look as if it was carved from clear ice," the swordswoman explained, shooing a too insistent goblin out of her way. "Also, stop building stuff while I'm talking to you and pay attention, because this is important!"

The red glow in Ami's eyes became more pronounced as she focused fully on Cathy, and the gaggle of goblins around the blonde took a collective step away from her.

"Yes?" Ami asked, a hint of her irritation seeping into her voice to mask her trepidation. Not *more* problems.

"To summarise, your plans for rapid response squads? They don't work," the blonde said.

"But-"

"Look, I know it should work in theory, but in practice, your troops can't do it. With more time to train and maps that don't become obsolete the moment we get them? Sure. As things are? No. "

"The coordinates-" Ami protested.

"Only tell us where to go, not how to get there." Cathy sighed. "I've run some drills with the best orcs, and even they got lost. You have to add something to the new corridors that will helps us navigate them, or all the fancy mirrors in the world will be of no use," She made a sweeping gesture with her arm that encompassed the scrying devices on the walls."

"Darn it! All right, I'll see what I can do." Ami muttered in frustration.

"That's all I ask," Cathy said cheerfully. "I'll tell my subordinates the good news!" She left, surrounded by her posse of green-skinned artists.

Ami sighed deeply. As if she didn't have enough work already, creating and balancing a power grid with questionable inputs on the fly while expanding her dungeon. While also keeping it from interfering with the system of channels and pipes that collected water and guided it through the mountain for various tasks. Without sufficient time to plan it all out.

Ami rested her head in her palms. No, now she also needed to come up with some sort of colour-coding system to let her troops pick the right direction at intersections, and apply it correctly as she excavated more tunnels. She stared blearily at the screen of her Mercury computer before gritting her teeth and carrying on.

The winding mountain path had a deep ravine on one side and was barely enough for two mule-drawn wagons to pass each other, but large boulders and groups of crooked pine trees shielded most of it from view.

Ami suspected that it was this cover that had prompted a small band of dwarf soldiers to take this route. The moment she appeared before them on the middle of the road, someone yelped "Keeper!" in alarm. The foremost warrior grabbed a horn from his belt and blew into it, producing a deep, echoing sound.

"Excuse me! Can-"

One of the mules shied from the sudden noise and jerked sideways, rattling the cart it was dragging. Its passengers jumped off, metal boots ringing as they struck the ground. Their comrades were already scattering.

"- I talk to- "

A hail of crossbow bolts cut off Ami's attempt at diplomacy, turning the front of her ice golem body into a pincushion.

"-yohhhhk- " She blinked when her tongue refused to move, pinned to the back of her throat to by a bolt that had entered her open mouth. Surprised and annoyed by her sudden inability to talk, she darted into cover behind one of the pines. Back pressed against the tree, her attempts to pry loose the slick projectile became increasingly hectic as she heard someone shout orders and the dwarfs fanned out. Finally, she managed to dislodge the thing by hitting the back of her neck with her fist. "Please, I'm just here to negotiate!" she shouted as more bolts whistled past.

"That so?" A gruff voice came from the direction of the dwarfs. "Then stay where you are and don't move!"

Progress at last! "Very well. I can do that. I'm glad we-"

Something struck the ground close to her hiding spot and exploded. The detonation slammed the broken trunk of the pine into Ami, breaking part of her shell and sweeping her off the mountain path.

As she went tumbling down the ravine, bouncing off the steep incline every few metres, she caught brief glimpses of a line of bearded, cheering faces on the path above. She would have to find another way, it seemed.

"Focus on their leaders if you can," Ami addressed the twelve motionless figures staring at her with blood- red eyes. She struggled to keep her gaze on them, rather than on the melon-sized eyeballs on fleshy stalks that protruded from the floor. Whenever her

attention lapsed, she found her gaze drawn toward the undulating devices. "If they are somehow protected, find someone who isn't."

"We shall be relentless," a black-robed man confirmed, elongated fangs glittering in his mouth as he spoke. With his left, he reached over to the eyeball standing closest to him and brushed over its smooth, wet surface with his fingertips.

Ami found the way the device leaned into the caress rather disturbing. She may have derived her communication spell from the things, but that didn't make them any less creepy and gross.

A second vampire took a gliding step forward, this one a female. In as far as the undead had body language, hers seemed uncertain. "Your Majesty, can you offer us advice on the best approach here? Should we be intimidating? Select targets of the opposite gender?"

"We are not trying to seduce anyone into joining us," Ami felt necessary to clarify, given the typical purpose of this kind of dungeon room. "Simply convince someone in charge to talk to me. No threats either. Be polite but insistent."

"As you desire." The vampire acknowledged, bowing. When she rose, she had a malevolent grin on her face. "We shall not give our targets even a moment of reprieve."

While searching for idle employees she could assign to dungeon maintenance, Ami spotted Tiger talking to her mother with a crystal ball. Surprised, she almost forgot to drop her senshi transformation before she transported herself over to her adopted sister. "Hello Mum, Sailor Moon, Tiger!" she greeted everyone with a smile.

"Hi Ami!" Sailor Moon replied, waving cheerfully. She blinked. "Is it really hot at your place?" she added.

Hot? Oh, the clothes. Instead of going into a long-winded, embarrassing explanation, Ami simply went with part of the truth and nodded. "Yes."

Her friend's face brightened. "Then how about you introduce ice

cream to that world?"

Mrs Mizuno concentrated more on the important issues. "Ami! Are you all right?" she asked, her concerned face growing larger within the scrying device as she pulled it closer. "You look exhausted."

"I'm under a lot of pressure right now," Ami understated the situation. She glanced over at her grinning sister. "Tiger, why didn't you tell me you are back?"

"Because everyone said you shouldn't be disturbed," the black-striped girl answered. "Besides, I don't think checking the mail for the civilians is a priority for you right now."

"It would still have been nice to know," Ami answered, though she privately agreed.

"Also, I needed an opportunity to tell them about your rapid descent into foulest evil," Tiger said, pointing her thumb at the crystal ball.

Ami's heart skipped a beat. "What? What did you -"

"You sent me out to make arrangements so you can consort with," Tiger looked sideways and brought her face closer to the crystal ball, "*lawyers*!" Pointing an accusing finger at her nonplussed sister, she continued "And just a bit earlier, you sicked tireless, bloodthirsty telemarketers on people! Evil! Evil I tell you!"

A faint smile played around Mrs. Mizuno's lips, but it disappeared when she saw that Ami had tensed and was only now relaxing.

"That wasn't very nice, Tiger," Sailor Moon chided.

"Come on, it was hilarious! Did you see her face?"

"She looked scared that you had done something hurtful," the pig-tailed blonde contradicted. Her frown implied the unsaid word "Again."

Tiger crossed her arms and turned away. "W-well, it's not my fault she can't take a joke!"

Before the ensuing silence could become awkward, Mrs Mizuno asked "Lawyers, Ami?"

"Um, yes." Ami confirmed. "I thought it would be easier to make diplomatic progress if I knew the local laws and customs and could act within their framework," she explained. "I was trying to hold off on contact with the dwarfs until I completely understood the legal situation, but..." She shrugged her shoulders and hung her head. Some of her frustration must have leaked into her voice, because a worried crease appeared on her mother's brow.

"Ami? What's wrong?" Mrs Mizuno asked in a small voice.

Ami didn't want to burden her mother with the knowledge about the impending attack, but on the other hand, leaving her in the dark would worry her just as much. In the end, she didn't want to hide even more things from her mother. "Oh Mum, they are coming here! They are going to attack me and I can't run and I don't want to hurt them but they think I'm evil and don't talk to me and they won't stop and I don't know what to do and it feels horrible!" She blurted out everything that had been weighing on her mind and then gasped for breath.

"Ami. Ami! Calm down," Mrs Mizuno called out in a comforting voice. "It's all right. We'll find a solution together," she said.

Ami doubted that, but she was grateful for the support. With some effort, she brought her breathing back under control and suppressed the sob that was threatening to spill from her throat.

"Let's approach this methodically. You said they aren't talking to you," Mrs Mizuno continued in the calm, clinical voice she used when diagnosing a patient. "What have you tried already?"

"I sent diplomats from a third party to talk to the dwarfs. I'm trying to get their neighbours, who *are* willing to negotiate, to initiate contact on my behalf. I tried meeting them in person, but they threw a bomb at me."

Her mother gasped.

"I wasn't in any danger! I was using an artificial body," Ami hurriedly reassured her. "Anyway, I have employees trying to talk to them telepathically right now, and I have also tried dropping a bunch of letters on them, but they are treating them like landmines."

That last attempt had at least slowed down the enemy advance a little, though Mareki disapproved of having to get so close to their crossbows.

"I have nothing to add off the top of my head," Mrs Mizuno said, "That seems fairly thorough."

"I could try talking to them too? With the crystal ball?" Sailor Moon offered.

Ami didn't think they would believe a random stranger more than her, and was about to say so, but reconsidered when she saw Usagi's hopeful expression. "Thank you," she said instead. It wasn't as if Sailor Moon could make them want to talk to her any less.

Mrs Mizuno's lips were a thin line. "In that case, are you adequately prepared to fend them off?"

"I hope so. I'm turning my dungeon into a fortress and am preparing for a siege," Ami replied. "Tunnels and seismographs to spot enemy miners early, guard rooms full of troops on rotating shifts, barricades to seal off compromised sections, and lots of non-lethal traps." A bit more subdued, she added "I'm also building more accelerated farms, but I fear I won't be able to adequately feed everyone for the first three days if I end up with many prisoners."

"What about fresh water?" her mother asked, examining a different, just as vital angle.

"I have a magical storm providing a steady supply," Ami was happy to tell her. With more area under her control, the corruption effects were increasing in magnitude. If she shifted her perspective outside of the dungeon, she could see a massive column-shaped cloud towering in the sky, its tapering bottom pointing directly at her mountain. It was raining so heavily now that she was actually worried about causing inundations further away.

"And troop numbers?" Mrs Mizuno asked.

"Um, from preliminary sightings, I believe that my troops are outnumbered perhaps four to one," Ami admitted.

Mrs Mizuno winced a little before she schooled her features into a cautiously optimistic expression. "Ah, that isn't so bad. If I recall correctly, well-trained and disciplined medieval forces could hold a fortress against such odds for as long as they had supplies."

Ami didn't have the heart to tell her that more than a third of her soldiers were goblins, which were the exact opposite of disciplined and well-trained. "It still doesn't feel right. I mean, those dwarfs are trying to do the right thing. I don't want their blood on my hands!"

Mrs Mizuno remained deep in thought for a moment before she spoke " Ami, the common soldiers. Do *they* know they don't have to fight you?"

Ami shook her head. "I don't know. I have been trying to talk to their leaders."

"Well, then you will have to let them know. Can you magic up," she waved her hand through the air, "something along the lines of a loudspeaker or megaphone? Let them know that you don't want to harm them and that you are simply defending yourself. Constantly. Make it completely clear that they have nothing to fear from you if they just leave you alone."

Ami nodded. It made sense to her, but she privately worried how her evil underlings would react to that.

"If they still keep coming, then you will have done all you can and won't have to feel guilty for defending yourself! Don't let them hurt you, Ami!" Mrs Mizuno exclaimed, her voice fiercer than Ami had ever heard her before.

"I'll-"

"Tiger, give your sister a hug from me," Mrs. Mizuno ordered, making both the older girl and Ami start.

The two looked at each other, their eyes wide, then looked at the crystal ball.

"Now!"

Sailor Moon was smiling and giving them a thumbs up, and Mrs Mizuno gave no indication that she was joking.

Tiger raised an eyebrow and shrugged, then took a step forward.

Ami went stiff as muscular arms enveloped her. It felt a little awkward at first, but not all that bad. Warm and comforting, even. Ami's fists slowly unclenched, and before she knew it, she was returning the hug, clinging to Tiger as if her life depended on it. A hand was patting her on the head in an unpractised, somewhat embarrassing way, and she felt something wet on her cheeks.

"Do your best, Ami. I believe in you," her mother said.

"You'll find a solution, Ami. You always do!" Sailor Moon added.

Their declaration of confidence didn't change the situation, but in Tiger's arms, Ami smiled and felt more confident than she had for a long time.

Half a day later, Tiger was bored as she chewed on the bland chicken leg she had bought from a market stall. Baron Leopold's city was dreadfully uninteresting. She hadn't gone through great effort to make her human disguise look considerably different from Mercury and only changed her hair black. The mischievous part of her that had pushed her to make an appointment here hoped that some citizens would notice her resemblance to the dark empress and jump to the right conclusions. The resulting shouts, panic, and fleeing townsfolk would have been a welcome distraction from waiting for her contact.

Where was that lousy lawyer anyway? He should have met her near the fountain almost half an hour ago. Tiger scanned the crowd and noticed that people were gravitating towards the main street. Hoofbeats and the noise of clanging metal were approaching from

the direction from the castle. A parade? Soldiers riding out for a mission?

Curious, the disguised youma pushed her way through the gaggle of cheering people until she had a front row position. Which, should the group include Baron Leopold, carried a not inconsiderable risk of him recognising her and an exhilarating chase ensuing. So sad. Ami would be quite disappointed if that happened. Well, actually she was busy protecting the furthest out imps from snipers, so she would hardly notice. Or want to talk to a lawyer. Changing circumstances had turned this whole lawyer idea into something of a waste of time, in Tiger's opinion.

She could see the foremost riders now, and yes, one of them had an absolutely massive moustache, fancy armour, and a purple plume on his helmet. That just had to be the famed Baron Leopold. He was talking with... "Huh? What in the Great Ruler's name is *he* doing here?"

The figure riding on a white horse next to Baron Leopold was unmistakeably the Avatar.

"...failed too. So did the wedding band plan. Lord Shinehame is spanking your subordinates pretty well in the south too, and -"

"Shut it. I don't care about those losers anyway," Mukrezar grumbled, steadying himself on a table as he glared at a crystal ball.

"Far be it from me to suggest that you are stretching your forces too thin, your Ambitiousness, but..."

A growl sound came from the pink-haired elf. "I hate him hate him hate him HATE HIM sooo much! He's cheating!" he shouted, pounding the table with his fist.

"What's wrong, your Hypocrisy?" the imp butler asked as he approached, carrying a tray with a steaming kettle and a cup full off black liquid. "Underhandedness is to be approved of!"

"He stole *my* trick!" The pink-haired Keeper struck the table again,

making the crystal ball on it jump. The composite picture of the Avatar being in various places at once dispersed as Mukrezar whirled around and glared at his minion. He snatched the cup from the tray and drowned it in one go, after which the dark circles around his red-blazing eyes faded a little.

"Aw, it must be so tragic to have another plan backfire on you," the imp replied, dodging the cup tossed at his head by leaning to the side.

"How am I supposed to find where he is making his new mantle when I don't know where he is?" Mukrezar asked rhetorically.

"Basic deduction, your Sleeplessness?" the butler asked as he poured his master another cup.

"Worth another try." Mukrezar snapped his fingers, and a world map carved from stone lowered itself from the ceiling, dangling from rattling chains. "Here we go." He pointed at the Avatar Islands, and its carved landscape crumbled to dust. "Not there, courtesy of yours truly."

His finger moved on to the Shining Concord Empire and hovered there as he thought aloud. "Here? Nah. Can't have the silly fairies get all high on magic and fly into trees or stab themselves on a unicorn or something. Even though a mangled pile of glittery sky vermin would be a public service, really."

"Truly a missed opportunity," his butler chimed in.

"Anyway, not there either." The boomerang-shaped continent crumbled away. "But do take a note that if I ever end up with more magic than I know what to do with, I'll dump the excess over there."

"As if you would ever run out of bad ideas before you run out of power, your Ingeniousness."

"My ideas are perfectly fine."

"Impeccable as your aim, Master," the imp mocked, standing still as the crystal ball missed him by a solid two metres. "Perhaps you may wish to try some actual sleep for a change, your Twitchyness?"

"Be quiet." Mukrezar's finger moved on. "Next! Deserts, no. Ice, no. Ocean, unsuitable too," he continued, " leaving," his eyes narrowed, "pretty much everywhere else. Well, I'm stumped." He threw up his arms, and a bolt of lightning shattered the map. "And too tired for this!"

The butler imp took cover behind his tray as stone shards pelted it and shrugged. "More potion, Master?" he asked, holding the kettle forward with his other hand.

The pink-haired elf ignored him. "Oh well, when in doubt, just kill everyone. If I just eliminate all the fakes, I'll have to find the right one sooner or later!"

"This entire attack is ill advised, Count Ornish", the Avatar said, looking over the troops assembled in the rough cave. A solid wall of rune-covered shields glowed dimly, hiding most of the plate-armoured dwarfs behind them. "Empress Mercury did not come to conquer your lands. There is absolutely no reason to attack her at this time."

A group of engineers assembling a large drill nodded a silent greeting at them as they walked past.

Ornish's jaw made chewing motions as he frowned. "Lord Avatar, you are a peerless warrior, and I greatly value your assistance, even in limited form." He glanced briefly at the man's left ring finger, covered by an armoured gauntlet. "Nevertheless - and with no disrespect intended - neither you or the Light have a convincing track record when it comes to conducting campaigns." He was speaking hesitantly, as if every word was costing him greatly, and his eyes were on the ground before him.

The sound of gritting teeth came from the Avatar.

"Your advice goes against traditional doctrine that demands Keepers to be engaged and destroyed without delay," Ornish continued. "Our nation remains deeply scarred from the one time we ignored it. We attack in the morning."

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The Enemy Approaches

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The inside of Ami's command centre was a strange blend of modern war room and dungeon architecture. Wide stairs led up from the bottom of the square chamber in all cardinal directions, providing access to the four successively receding floors. On each of these terraces, screen-like mirrors in ornate metal frames lined the walls and showed images of the outside. Between them, water trickled down over the murals, veiling the more objectionable motives and cooling the hot air.

On the top floor, some goblins were playing with the cascading water instead of occupying their cushioned armchairs made of rock. Undeterred, the mirrors they should have been watching kept showing needles that traced lines onto scrolling paper.

Fortunately for Ami, the warlocks seated on the two floors below were more disciplined and kept scanning the surface for her enemies. Only one of them was not paying attention and feeding a potted carnivorous plant instead, but in his defence, there was nothing to see on his dark screen anyway.

One floor deeper still, none dared shirk their duties. Not only did the command staff reside on this level, but the dark empress herself was in attendance just below, at the bottom of the chamber. Her command chair, currently empty, stood at the centre of the lowest floor, surrounded by seats for her personal assistants. Various map tables were scattered around the place, leaving enough space for groups of imps to dart between them.

One of these tables showed the mountain and its neighbours in accurately-modelled detail. An imp stood astride two peaks, updating the flooding status of the valley below with the aid of a ladle and a bucket of water.

Ami shooed the creature away with an impatient twitch of her hand because she needed an unobstructed view. She leaned on the edge

of the round table, frowning at the many crevices, forests, and rocky protrusions that could be hiding her enemies.

Footsteps approached her from behind, and she turned to see Jered come down the stairs. "Here, the latest requests for flares," he said, holding out a sheet of paper covered in coordinates.

Ami took the note and covered a yawn with her free hand, no longer even batting an eye at seeing him walk around shirtless. She glanced at the map for reference, reached through space, and projected a number of overcharged light spells outside her territory. Several scrying mirrors two floors above brightened, showing raindrops turning into glistening threads as they fell towards the dimly-lit circles of forest canopy below.

"Tired?" Jered asked as Ami rubbed her eyes. "Personally, I think you would have been better off sleeping than hunting dwarfs all night. Even with your lights, the scrying spells don't show much in the dark."

"Which is exactly why I need to be here," Ami contradicted. "I can patrol with my Keeper sight, which isn't impeded by the darkness."

Jered shrugged. "On your territory, anyway." He approached the map, eyeing the parts shaded in aquamarine critically. "Which would limit you mainly to this mountain and to those thin paths leading outwards. Still?" He raised an eyebrow at Ami.

"The rats aren't claiming as fast as expected," she allowed.

"Ah, yes. Rain, backpacks and silly dances on steep inclines don't make for a safe working environment."

"Actually, that's not the main issue. They simply don't know instinctively where I need them to go, like the imps do. In narrow tunnels, that's not much of a problem, but in the open terrain..."

"I don't event want to think about having to order them all around individually," Jered said, shaking his head. "So, I take it the dwarfs are staying away from your sensory trails?" He traced one of the straight aquamarine paths with his finger as it followed the terrain

contours up a nearby mountain.

Ami nodded, her shoulders drooping. "At least I know where they aren't." She stared at the regions not in her colour, worrying about how much area that included. "Every little thing helps." In a whisper, she added "I don't want this fight."

Above, metal armour rang against stone as Cathy leaned over the railing. "I bet you stopped them from approaching anyway. All those flares must have messed up their night vision," she said cheerfully, a tone that didn't properly match the dark circles around her eyes.

"I'll take that bet," one of the warlocks said, turning away from his mirror to face her. "Because, technically speaking, dwarfs can't see in the dark. They can, however, sense the concentration of minerals in their vicinity, which, in close proximity, makes for a suitable substitute and-"

"Unless you can do the same with your scrying, I'm not interested," the blonde cut him off. "Sun's about to rise anyway, so search harder!"

Ami jerked in surprise when she felt something unexpected from her territory.

"Here!" A goblin on the top floor shouted, climbing up on her chair and jumping up and down while she pointed at the mirror behind her. "Flat line thingy going all spiky!"

Ami raised her head, taking only an instant to verify that the position of the supervised seismograph coincided roughly with the odd disturbance she had felt - past the first ring of defensive corridors already! Barely a moment later, an image of the place in question formed in her mind. Flat and rocky, it lacked vegetation that could have hidden invaders. There weren't any suspicious footprints in the mud either, and the raindrops splashing into the omnipresent puddles didn't hit anything invisible on the way down. Certain that she had sensed *something* Ami remotely filled the area with a Shabon Spray fog before she turned her attention to the underground.

Her Keeper sight - maybe she should call it Keeper sense instead - didn't let her see through the layers of earth and stone, but she could still use it to listen, even some distance away from any claimed surface. In a way, it was similar to a seismograph, with her dungeon heart interpreting small noises and vibrations for her in order to show her the general layout of her subterranean surroundings.

"-troops to those coordinates!" Cathy ordered, her metal boots having left a little dent in the floor when she had jumped down from above. She was standing at a different table, moving tiny figures of orcs and goblins across a map of the dungeon. A pointy-bearded warlock stood across from her, sparks of mana twinkling in his right eye as he mentally relayed her orders.

"Wait, there's nothing!" Ami interrupted, her attention fully returned to the command centre.

Cathy threw her a surprised look and quickly told the warlock "Call them back, false alarm!"

The magic user nodded mutely, grabbed the representations of the soldiers and moved them back to the nearest guard post.

Ami felt the same sensation as before, this time from the opposite side of the mountain. She didn't even wait for one of the goblins to announce the disturbance and immediately observed the area in her mind. Movement, just above the tree line. She suppressed the momentary fright at having several layers of her defences bypassed and took a closer look at the descending rocks and gravel. A little cloud of dust, present despite the rain and mud, made it clear to her what had happened here.

"Bombardment," she stated for the benefit of those in the command centre even as she felt two additional impacts. Not that anyone could hear her with the way four goblins were shouting at the top of their lungs.

"Here too!" a corpulent green-skinned girl screeched. "Look!"

"No, look mine! Jaggier!"

"Mine more better still!"

Ami sighed. Manning the internal surveillance stations with goblins had sounded like a good idea at the time. With an external mana supply and no need to adjust anything, the job wasn't complicated enough to warrant wasting the time of her more skilled employees on. Attention-seeking goblins could be handled with a little forethought.

Something whistled and cracked in the air. "Shut up, all of you! Quiet!" A woman in a black leather outfit that had nothing to fear from the corruption stalked towards the unruly greenskins, stretching a whip between her hands.

"Eep!" The closest goblin dived behind his chair and hid, and the rest paled and ducked too.

Keeping the goblins in line was about the limit of what Ami was willing to use her few dark mistresses for. They weren't allowed to touch the small underlings, but the goblins didn't know that. "Bombardment," she repeated now that the room was quiet. "They are throwing rocks at us."

"So they are messing up the surface. How scary," Cathy deadpanned. "What do they intend to achieve? Well, aside from getting the goblins all worked up, that is."

Ami wasn't taking the situation quite as lightly. "Blinding us to their approach. The constant impacts are actually very distracting," she stated with a sour expression. "Imagine someone is prodding you with a finger in random places, except in your mind." She looked up at the higher floors and raised her voice. "Goblins! Change of plans! Stop reporting single spikes. Only look for constant activity!"

"Only shout if the there are no holes between the spikes for a while," Cathy translated, being more familiar with the goblins' large selection of uncomprehending expressions than Ami.

"Yes. That," the young Keeper confirmed. Digging dwarfs should produce a different pattern than the boulders raining down on the territory now. Her seismographs could still provide her with a

warning, even if it would come much later than she would have liked. She wondered briefly if the dwarfs knew about her detectors. No, probably not. The steady drumming of the falling boulders would also hide any digging noises from more mundane listening attempts. Additionally, the insistent reminders that her land was under attack were getting really, really annoying. Was that why Keepers usually waited with claiming the surface until they had done away with the resistance?

"Where are they launching all those things from?" Cathy mused aloud, peering at the map. "I find it hard to believe that we missed every single catapult being built, even if it was under the cover of a starless night."

"I'm working on that," Ami snapped while entering the impact locations into her Mercury computer, trying to keep up with what her Keeper senses were telling her. She reminded herself that the bombardment, while irritating, didn't pose a direct danger, and let out a long breath. "Sorry. The impacts are making it hard to concentrate," she apologised for her outburst. Still, the sooner she found the source, the better.

Jered was unashamedly looking over her shoulder, blinking at the screen. "Is it just me, or are the rocks landing closer to inhabited areas?"

Ami stopped typing. "Now that you mention it, it does look as if the shots are getting more accurate, but-" she paused as she felt something that chilled her to the core. "What was *that*?" It had felt like one of the other contacts, with the all-important difference that it came from one of her tunnels *underground*.

Not losing a second, she investigated with Keeper sight. Sure enough, she found rainwater trickling down into a smooth-walled pit. It gathered on top of the reinforced ceiling of one of the defensive corridors ringing the mountain, and a faint plume of smoke rose from the hole. There were still no dwarfs around. Her eyes widened. "Darn it!"

"Mercury, what's going on?" Cathy asked.

"It's not just a distraction, they can put burrowing enchantments on their rocks!" In her mind's eye, Ami discovered more pits leading deep down now that she knew to look for them. Since they hadn't hit anything directly, they had not felt any different from the regular impacts.

"Shit! If they can just charge and dive into the holes, they'll bypass many of the traps!" Cathy hurried over to Ami's map table. Her eyes darted across the various terrain features, lingering on the closest woods. "Where are the most holes?"

"I'm moving some reaperbots to the critical areas," Ami answered. "There and there. Over here too."

An imp rushed over to the dungeon map and removed a number of scythe-wielding figurines.

Even as she positioned the automatons on the surface, Ami realised that they wouldn't be enough to properly defend the entire threatened area. Not if she didn't know where the attack would be coming from. "I'm using up the water reservoir in sector F9," she informed the others.

Her tremor spell split a cliff, and water gushed forth as if a dam had broken. As it cascaded down the mountainside, it swept along rocks and mud, gathering more and more mass on the way down.

Satisfied, Ami watched the holes in the stream's path fill with liquid and gravel. If the dwarfs wanted to invade from that direction, they would need diving equipment. Still, this was a temporary measure at best, and she needed to find the source of the rocks and shut it down. It was too bad her visor couldn't enhance her Keeper sight. "I'll be back shortly," she announced before she disappeared in a flash of blue.

After the sweltering heat within her dungeon, the air above the snow-topped peak of her mountain felt as if she had jumped into a tub filled with ice water. Frigid raindrops smashed against her visor, drenching her in moments. The parts of her cloak that weren't

plastered to her body fluttered in the howling winds, threatening to carry her off like a kite with its rope cut.

Ami remedied the problem by casting a shield around herself, creating a bubble of force that held off the elements. To the east, she could see the sun starting to rise, its disc tinted a mild shade of pink by the layer of magic. In the morning sunlight, the trickles and rivulets running down the west side of her mountain shone red like lava - an impression that wasn't helped by the stack of black thunderclouds that piled up above the peak.

The clouds around the neighbouring mountain peaks all hung much lower, but Ami didn't question her luck. If the weather above her dungeon wanted to defy the rules of physics to allow her a clear view of the valley below, then she wasn't complaining. With fingers stiff from the cold, she instructed her computer to track the trajectories of any flying object below. Shivering, she dismissed the wet cloak that felt as if she was wearing an ice block. Her short shorts and equally short blouse were not meant for this climate either, and with clattering teeth, she muttered a formula that conjured a dry version of her lost garment. Since she had started using that spell, cloaks had quickly become fashionable among the more powerful corruption-plagued magic users inhabiting her dungeon.

Her visor kept recording data, and more and more lines gathered on her screen. One set originated from a copse of trees, another from underneath an overhanging cliff. Too far away to see the equipment from her current location, Ami simply unloaded a Shabon Spray onto both of those locations. She would deal more permanently with them after a little scrying back in her comfortably warm dungeon. As soon as she had located the rest of the launch locations.

Consulting her screen in more detail, she blinked in surprise. There were boulders incoming from what looked like empty ground, rocks, and cliffs. How could anyone position siege equipment on a near-vertical wall, let alone without her being able to see it? No, wait. With projectiles that could smoothly penetrate a considerable distance of rock, there was nothing stopping the dwarfs from firing them from underground.

"I've found them!" Ami announced upon teleporting back to the command centre. "Second floor warlocks! I'm going to mark twenty-six locations on the map. I want each of you to scry on one of them." She raised a finger, pointing at the wrinkly magic user seated closest to her. "You will take the first location." Her finger moved to the right, wandering across the seated magicians in sequence "You take the next, you the next, and so on."

"Yes, Empress!"a chorus of voices replied.

Once she was done placing the markers, she hurried over to her command chair and sat down in front of her own crystal ball. A brief, enthusiastic squeal was her only warning before an imp jumped onto her armrest and attacked her hair with a towel, sending droplets everywhere.

Blinking, Ami decided to endure the treatment - she had been getting fed up with rainwater trickling into her eyes anyway - and concentrated on the locations she hadn't put on the map. Her crystal ball activated, showing her the copse of trees. In the twilight, it was hard to make out the catapult between the tree trunks, but its rectangular contours gave it away. She also spotted five dwarfs servicing the siege equipment, their armour covered in mud and leaves to mute its shine.

For a short while, she observed, wanting to learn more about her opponents. A little off from the centre of the clearing, she spotted two more dwarfs kneeling in front of a boulder. The tools in their hands moved deftly, carving additional runes into a surface already covered in tiny symbols. Ami couldn't tell what they were supposed to do, but circumstances suggested that the patterns were responsible for the projectile's terrain-penetrating properties. Her warlocks should take a look at that, later.

As the dwarfs loaded another rock into the catapult, Ami struck. A single bolt of lightning, strong enough to shatter the construction. Or at least, that was what she expected to happen. Instead, the spell veered off-target as it formed, sucked into a chain made of thick metal links. One of them snapped, crumbling away into thin grey ash. Her target was warded.

The dwarfs stopped what they were doing, their heads whipping into the direction of the magical light show. One of them shouted something, and they all dropped what they were doing.

Ami let them scatter and disappear into the forest because she wanted them to know that fleeing was an entirely viable option. Briefly, she considered testing the properties of the ward. While knowing the capabilities of her opponents would be useful, stopping the bombardment was more urgent. One compressed Shabon Spray later, she had a large, floating Keeper hand with which she gave the closest tree a good shove. The pine's roots tore from the wet ground as it toppled right onto the catapult, smashing it into kindling. One down. With the animated hand, she sifted through the debris and pulled out the chain. An instant later, it landed in one of her laboratories. The boulder the dwarfs had been working on suffered the same fate.

Ami addressed the small group of cloak or robe-wearing figures seated near her chair. "I have dropped some recovered equipment in library appendix three," she told them. "I need its wards analysed as soon as possible."

"Immediately, your Majesty!" The five eager-looking warlocks hurried away at once.

"Loot! Loot! Loot!" one of the goblins above shouted, a chant that was picked up by a second and then cut short by the crack of a whip.

Ami turned her crystal ball's attention to the emplacement underneath the overhanging cliff. Expecting more wards, she didn't waste time with spells. Her ice hand dropped into the hideout before the dwarfs down there knew what was going on. One moment, they were carefully aiming their cannon, the next, the thick tube was ascending toward the sky in the grip of a giant frozen hand. A quick toss later, and a muddy column of water rose from the flooded valley below. Two down.

Ami teleported to one of the mirrors prepared by her warlocks, who flinched at her sudden appearance.

"There's a cave down there, but it's unlit and I can't really see inside, my Empress," he muttered apologetically.

"It's not your fault they don't need light," Ami reassured him absently. She gazed at the image underneath the glass, inspecting the clustered holes in the rock. A light spell should - no, it didn't form. There had to be more wards down there. Overloading them with powerful spells thrown in blindly wasn't an option - she wanted to stop the dwarfs, not kill them. Was there anything nearby she could set on fire and throw into the cave? The rain would be working against her in this case, but -

One of the goblins interrupted her train of thought. "Me think this is steady pointy line?"

"Yes." Ami answered in a flat tone of voice, her heart rate increasing. "Yes, it is." She didn't even have to look at the seismograph for confirmation. The sensation of someone trying to dig into her dungeon left no room for doubt.

"Got proper line too!" a different goblin yelled.

"Me too!"

"They like mine here?"

"Right signal look like this?"

"Enemies emerging from the woods, Q23!" One of the warlocks yelled.

"Same, S21!"

The noise in the command centre surged as different observers began calling out coordinates in quick succession, too fast for Ami to follow them all.

The invasion had begun, faster and more coordinated than she had expected. "You all know what to do!" she shouted over the noise. "Direct your assigned squads to the breaches! Only signal me personally when our soldiers have trouble!"

In the scrying mirrors showing the interior of her dungeon, orcs and goblins rushed through the tunnels, weapons in hand.

"Cathy, concentrate mainly on keeping away the dwarfs on the surface," Ami instructed as she stared at the markers her imps were constantly updating the map with. A forest of red pins surrounded her mountain on all sides, creeping closer as she watched. Reluctantly, she selected warriors from her reserves and reinforced the most likely routes her attackers would take. Under her cloak, hidden from her underlings, she wrung her hands as her dread rose. She had been in worse situations before, but this time, she was fighting innocent people who meant well.

Underground Chaos

Originally on 2014-05-16T17:06:00

When the first wall crumbled, Ami hurried to view its location. She arrived just in time to see bricks and mortar spray into the corridor, propelled by a dwarven shield ramming its way through the weakened masonry.

A short, broad-shouldered warrior forced his way through the gap, pebbles pinging off his armour as he brushed aside the last stones in his way. He exited the dusty opening, narrowed eyes visible through the slit in his full helmet, and looked around. "Way's clear," he called out after a moment and pointed his pickaxe down the corridor. "Smash anything that looks important and mind the trapdoors!"

More stout figures poured out of the hole, jogging after the miner as he took off down the corridor.

"I am not here to attack your country. Leave my dungeon and I won't harm you!" Ami projected mentally at the dozen or so invaders. At the same time, she felt three other walls give way elsewhere in the dungeon, prompting her to deal with this situation quickly.

The dwarfs didn't stop or even hesitate. Their faces were hidden underneath their helmets, but Ami did not spot any change in their body language either. One of them was wearing one of the warding chains she had encountered before as a belt, so chances were they hadn't heard her at all.

The dungeon heart informed Ami of yet another breach on the other side of the mountain. Feeling rushed, she transported her Keeper hand behind the quickly-advancing group and launched the animated mass of water forward.

One of the dwarfs swept his pickaxe through a violet light crystal in passing, turning his torso to the left has he did, and spotted the movement. "Behind us!"

The giant hand smashed into the hindmost dwarf, slamming her into the soldier before her and sending both of them tumble. By now, the others were turning their heads and stopping, or at least trying to. They had been moving fairly quickly, and all the momentum stored in their heavy armour didn't just disappear.

"Stop! Stop! Trapdoor ahead!" the dwarf in front shouted as he was pushed forward, his metal soles screeching as they skidded over the floor.

"Trying!"

Ami winced inwardly as armour rang and the dwarfs in the middle were caught between her shove and the slowing front of the group. Still, she kept shoving, pushing the invaders over like falling dominoes and forcing them forward.

One of them threw himself to the ground and anchored his pick in the stone. With a grunt, he managed to maintain his hold even when the dwarf behind him stumbled over him. The next one didn't manage to keep his balance and landed hard on the prone dwarf's shoulder. There was an ugly snapping noise, and he let go of the weapon's haft, "My arm!"

Ami felt bad for him as she kept pushing the pile of warriors forward, but the many alerts coming from the perimeter of her dungeon meant she couldn't afford the time to be gentle. With a final shove, she forced the soldiers into the trap they had been intending to avoid.

The foremost dwarf waved his arms and jumped ahead with desperate strength, but not far enough. The floor underneath him clicked and dropped away. With a loud splash, he landed in the muddy water below. More splashes and cries of protest followed in rapid succession.

The water wasn't deep enough for Ami to worry about her enemies drowning, but it would certainly keep them from fighting back effectively. Her closest troops should arrive within a minute to fish them out. One group of invaders more or less disabled, without too many injuries. That left only - her eyes widened - about two dozen

others, with more popping up all the time. Her stomach plummeted. If all of the enemy parties were about as small as this one, she could be dealing with hundreds of incursions shortly. "Darn it!"

She clenched her teeth, as she opened her eyes and surveyed the screens in her command centre. No choice but to rely on her troops and limit herself to intervening where it made the most strategic sense. Still, knowing that people would get injured and possibly die because she was busy elsewhere... Ami wrapped her arms around herself and pushed those thoughts aside. Both her troops and the misguided dwarfs couldn't afford her to be anything but fully concentrated and efficient right now.

"Faster!" Minkoth urged, his voice echoing through the freshly-hewed tunnel. On his palm, the end of a very short chain glowed red as another link burned to ash. "Dig faster, Urist! He's almost through the wards!"

"Doing the best I can!" the miner in front growled, breathing heavily as he swung his pickaxe through the air.

The tool slowed with a jerk, making a grinding noise as it burrowed into an invisible obstacle. Faintly-glowing cracks spread outward through the space around the enchanted weapon, accompanied by the noise of crumbling rock.

"Coward! Stop casting spells at us when we can't fight back you evil fucker!" the first dwarf shouted, shaking his fist at the chuckling warlock towering behind the barrier of invisible rock.

"B-be polite, that has to be the Emp- Keeper herself," a third dwarf whispered from behind him, a worried frown marring the face behind the open visor. "Anyone else wouldn't have the power to burn through the protections that quickly!"

The warlock chuckled and stood straighter, the hem of his too-long robes hovering a finger's width above the ground. "Pathetic dirt-digging midgets, you are sadly mistaken. I am *merely* - in as far as such a word can apply to me - Torian, chief warlock of her Imperial

Majesty! Who, in her inscrutable wisdom, has decreed that I need to inform you that she bears you no ill will and is going to let you retreat should you chose to leave now."

A dwarf near the front of the squad looked back over her shoulder. "Means she isn't ready to face us yet!" she interpreted cheerfully for the others, and Minkoth felt his mood lift a little. Even if his group should be defeated, others would keep his home safe.

Torian's bored expression turned into a smirk. "Unconvinced by her generous offer? That suits me well. I would not get to play with live targets if you had fled before my might."

"The guy in a dress sure likes to hear himself talk," Urist muttered as he brought down his pick again, shattering more of the invisible rock between them and their attacker.

"At least he isn't casting while he's running his mouth off." another dwarf said, shrugging his shoulders.

"Torian? I think I've heard that name before," someone else pondered.

"Ah, my fame precedes me!" the warlock said with a grin. "Let me add to it. BEHOLD! The instrument of your doom!" He raised his staff over his head, holding it horizontal so that the dwarfs could see its full length. The ivory-coloured implement consisted of a main shaft studded with winding protrusions. "This is the combination of my genius and secrets stolen from the dark gods themselves, carved from the tooth of the eldest dragon!"

Urist gasped and froze and gaped at the magical weapon with dismay that mirrored Minkoth's own. "You defiled such precious material with your shoddy craftsmanship?"

Torian narrowed his eyes at him. "Shoddy, is it now? Well, perhaps you-"

The loud twang of a crossbow being fired interrupted him. Not unlike the dwarven picks, the bolt burrowed straight through the intervening rock as it headed for the warlock.

Torian flinched and went cross-eyed as the pointy blur shot straight at his face, leaving a thin trail filled with sublimating rock powder in its wake. There was a bright flash from the gems set into the projectile as it encountered the invisible dungeon wall and kept going. A smacking impact later, Torian squealed and toppled over backwards.

Minkoth high-fived the dwarf who got up from behind a boulder, crossbow in hand and a grin on her face. "Good one, Olon! Didn't think we'd have to use one of the special bolts this early!"

"Oh, you'll wish you hadn't done that," Torian growled as he sat up, blood trickling down his forehead from a long scratch. The bolt studded with burnt-out gems lay in front of him, bent.

"He's that thick-headed?" Urist boggled.

"Wards of his own," Minkoth muttered, noting the purple smoke originating from somewhere underneath the evil wizard's robe and escaping from the collar.

"Enough talking! Words are clearly wasted on you hairy garbage," Torian said. Black sparks gathered around his staff as he levitated himself back into a standing position.

The warlock started mumbling, his weapon pointed at the dwarfs, and Minkoth could only watch in horror as the last link of the warding chain exploded into powder. This was not supposed to happen! His liege had ordered him to get into the dungeon, and now he was being foiled by a single lousy warlock? The bitter shame and dishonour of failing to heed his baron's command made his arm sluggish as he raised it to signal a retreat. "Back! Fall baph-" He tasted hair that tried to get into his mouth, muffling his words. His skin was prickling everywhere and he could feel the braids of his beard writhe like snakes. What had that black-hearted bastard of a warlock cursed him with?

Ahead of him, the strap of Urist's helmet creaked and snapped. The helmet shot off the other dwarf's head like a cork popping from a bottle, riding on the swelling mass of hair that had been trapped underneath it. Within moments, beard and mane reached the

ground, getting tangled in each other as they grew. The miner stepped on it and promptly fell over.

"With how proud you dwarfs are of your beards, you should be thanking me for this!" Torian taunted. "And her Imperial Majesty too, since it was she who gave me this idea!"

Minkoth's own helmet departed, spilling strands of hair over his face and robbing him of his sight. He raised his hand got it about half-way to its destination before it stopped, the joints of his armour clogged with bushels of - oh Forge God no, the spell wasn't limited to just his head!

As he and his warriors struggling against the suffocating masses of fur, he could hear the warlock's high-pitched, mocking laughter.

The floor shook with each step the dragon took towards the group of dwarven invaders, his fiery breath splashing off their hastily-raised shield wall. Panting orcs were taking cover behind the slowly-advancing behemoth, flinching every time a crossbow bolt pinged off his metal-painted scales.

Ami couldn't help but admire the bravery of the four dwarfs still blocking the passage. Sweating from the heat and with their shield arms shaking, they braved the flames to buy time for their companions to retreat. A cold lump formed in her stomach as she noted a dwarf kneeling over a still figure, shake his head and move on.

Carrying their wounded on their shoulders, the dwarfs fled back into the relative safety of the hole they had come from. Their tunnels were too small for the dragon to follow them, and neither orcs nor trolls wanted to fight in a space where they'd have to crouch.

Goblins had no such problems, but Ami no longer sent them in there.

Unbidden, her mind strayed to a tunnel where green-skinned bodies lay in pools of their own blood among crossbow bolts and severed

limbs. Their sightless eyes looked up at the low ceiling, staring at her accusingly. If only she had acted faster and prioritised differently when she noticed them coming under attack, she might have been able to do something.

Instead, she had chosen to finish redeploying one of the dragons to a more advantageous location, trusting the six goblin warriors to hold their own against the advancing forced for just a few moments longer. Strategically, it had been the right decision. The sudden arrival of the armoured, fire-breathing monster had stopped the advance of two dwarf squads cold, saving a group of her more valuable underlings.

Ami clenched her fists. She hated having to rank her employees in terms of how expendable they were. Unfortunately, with many different fights going on concurrently, she didn't have any choice in the matter. The dungeon heart granted her many powerful abilities, but being able to pay attention to more than one place at the time was not among them.

Thus, since she was already intervening here, she had to make sure this particular group of invaders wasn't going to regroup and come back. Aiming sufficiently far ahead of their wards, she cast two spells.

The foremost dwarf bit back a curse as pillars of glittering ice rose in his path. Not faltering in his stride, he flipped his pickaxe around and swung at the obstacle with the pick-shaped side. He cursed in surprise when the ice reached out with a slender arm and caught his weapon in a vice-like grip. The wooden haft splintered around the ice golem's fist as she closed it completely, snipping off the head of the pickaxe.

Ami still couldn't completely exclude the possibility that the animated statues might be sapient or had the potential to become so. However, in the current situation, not using them meant she would have to risk soldiers who were undoubtedly people instead. More pragmatically, the golems were shorter than her other troops and less hindered by their size in the dwarven tunnels. Too bad that each of them tied up a portion of her magical power for as long as they lived.

"Your Majesty, enemy charging at surface coordinates B ten!" the shout of a warlock called her back to her physical location. "Big group, no troops close enough to intercept in time!"

Blinking, Ami changed her perspective to the indicated grid square. TWhat did they want at that impassible-looking slope?

Maybe a hundred or so squat invaders darted out of the wet undergrowth, their long, braided beards swaying. Nimble like mountain goats, the lightly-armoured figures hurried across the uneven terrain, hopping over boulders and balancing along narrow ledges.

The black-bearded dwarf at the front stopped to fasten a rope and dangle it down a wall he had just scaled. Ami noticed that he, like a few others, was wearing one of those annoying ward chains around his waist. If she really wanted to, she could break through the protections without straining herself - at the cost of wasting time since the chains failed only one link at a time. It was much quicker to simply work around this obstacle. With a hurried salvo of Shabon Spray Freezing spells targeted at the wet rock ahead of the dwarfs, she coated their route in a layer of ice.

The effects were immediate. Hands slipped as they reached for the rocks ahead, feet stepped on slippery footing, and dwarfs tumbled back down into their companions. The smooth advance slowed to a crawl as the frozen area forced the dwarfs to deploy climbing aids in order to move on.

It would be enough to delay the attack until some troops could reach the threatened area. Ami hurriedly started searching for some soldiers that weren't already fighting or hurrying toward a fight. Were dark elves agile enough to fight in that kind of terrain? Wait, she could make use of the giant vermin that tended to wander in through the portal. She reached into the dark corners of her dungeon and plucked several chitinous, many-legged creatures from their lairs. After dropped the squirming, wriggling bugs near the surface, she shooed them out of the holes the dwarfs were trying to reach. A few more prods of her Keeper hand, and she had them moving in the right direction. Showing complete disregard for trivial things such as vertical cliff faces, the giant insects crawled downwards toward the

invaders.

Ami knew the creepy things were a pushover in a fair fight, but even the most enthusiastic mountain climber would think twice about putting his hands where a dog-sized cockroach might eat them. They should keep the situation more or less under control until she could free up stronger defenders. Such as the golems she had previously created. Were they done yet?

One of the statues had grabbed two different dwarfs and hung suspended between them as they tried to pull away in opposite directions. Surrounded by their allies, she twisted and turned to alleviate the impacts of the blows they were raining down on her. Her shell was covered in gashes and cracks from the axe strikes, but only a few hit solidly enough to pierce the ice. By now, the armour she had started out with littered the ground in small frozen pieces, and she was noticeably smaller that before.

The other statue, slick from the water that trickled from her cracks, glided out of the bear hug from a dwarf trying to restrain her. She hit her head on the ceiling and botched her landing, frozen limbs slipping in the puddle of water on the ground. Both she and her her attacker fell over and continued struggling on the ground.

Ami evaluated the situation in a split-second. Had the golems gotten rid of the wards? There was a broken chain gleaming on the ground some distance away, next to a doubled-over dwarf holding his midriff. Another soldier, busy kicking the prone golem repeatedly with his iron-heeled boots, held a second ward with only three or so non-mangled links. Close enough.

Zap. Zap. Zap. Ami used Keeper lightning as fast as she could, but it only worked on her fourth try. The tunnel lit up with blinding light, and a blue-white bolt of electricity hit the water that had leaked from her golems.

The dwarfs standing in the puddle screamed and convulsed. Ami had kept the power down to about that of a taser, but she still swallowed when she saw the twitching bodies. Unaffected by the current, one golem ran off to call the troops outside the tunnel, while the other started disarming the fallen enemies.

Confident that these particular dwarfs would soon sit out the battle within her prisons, Ami concentrated on the notifications from her dungeon heart to learn where she was needed most urgently.

A mixed group of three orcs, three trolls, and ten goblins waited in lose formation around a reaperbot, their gaze following the sounds of excavation moving around on the other side of the dungeon wall.

"Where the hell are those imp morons?" Lorn, the largest of the trolls, asked while tapping the tip of his club against the ground impatiently. "They better get here soon or the midgets will dig straight past us!"

Kner shrugged his shoulders, not all that disappointed about the prospect of missing an opportunity to risk life and limb in battle.

"Don't worry. They are totally lost. They moved past us twice since we got here," another troll said. "Think the Empress did something to them?"

"Nah, too drunk to dig in a straight line!" Lorn quipped, to the approving laughter of his companions. "Still, the stupid imps should hurry up. It's been too long since I got to fight something for real," he said, baring his teeth.

"Bleh. Having to take them alive takes all the fun out of it," a smaller troll in leather armour complained, glowering with evident disgust at the throwing nets and blunt weapons the group was armed with.

"Half dead still counts as alive," the third orc pointed out, grinning. "Also, try not to crack up too much when we give them the Empress' warning."

"No promises, boss," the troll who had been quiet until now commented, smirking and crossing his arms.

"Hah!"

"Bah, as if they'd ever believe we'd let them go anyway!"

"Yeah, I have no idea what the Empress is thinking," Lorn grumbled, shaking his head.

"Big surprise."

"Who ever does?"

The goblins just snorted.

"I mean more so than usual," Lorn amended. "I mean, usually when she does stuff, you can still kind of see it's going somewhere, even if you have no idea where. But, uh, letting those ugly dwarfs leave if they flee? What's the point?"

"Empress really want them go away?" one of the goblins guessed.

"Quiet, idiot," the leather-clad troll muttered, prompting the small green creature to hide from his glare behind the reaperbot.

"The live capture part makes sense, annoying as it is," the boss orc mused. "She'll need more warriors to take on their kingdom, and turning their own against them just makes the victory sweeter."

"Sure, but that's not what I was asking. Why let some get away?" Lorn insisted.

"They carry home horrible disease?" the goblin tried again.

The others fell quiet for a moment.

"The goblin said something that actually made a bit of sense," the troll in leather admitted after a while, scratching his head. "Huh. I sure hope we won't catch it, too."

"No. I refuse to believe her plan is so simple that someone like him can figure it out," Lorn said, pointing his thumb at the green creature. "Kner, you are good at this thinking thing, what do you figure? Kner? Hey, Kner?" the other orc elbowed him to catch his attention. "What are you spacing out about there?"

"Just trying to figure out what the dwarfs are doing." He didn't believe for an instant that they didn't know where they were going.

Several passes in the same area by necessity meant that a larger volume of rock had been excavated. A staging area for a larger assault? A place to assemble one of their drills? None of the possibilities he was coming up with made him want to be at the forefront of the battle.

"Look, they are finally trying to break through!" Lorn shouted excitedly, pointing with his club at a spot down the corridor where dust trickled from the ceiling.

"We'll hit them as soon as they get through. The big bucket here," the boss rapped his knuckles against the reaperbot, "leads the charge and knocks them over. We clobber and truss up the rest."

There were general sounds of agreement with the plan, and Kner didn't object. Any plan where he had a reason to arrive late to the front line was a good one in his book.

He heard a sizzling noise, followed by a muffled yelp, and the lights wavered and dimmed.

"What was that?"

"Must have dug through one of the magic thingies in the walls," the troll in light armour guffawed.

"Just how fucking drunk are they? That's no way to make a breach!" Lorn complained when the dwarfs didn't create an opening, but instead started lengthening the weakened section towards the left and right wall.

"What *are* they doing, Kner?" the boss asked with a sideways glance.

The shape of the damage gave Kner the mental image of the corridor as a log and the dwarfs as an axe that chopped it in half. "Making a vertical cut through the tunnel," he speculated as hammering blows continued dislodging tiles from both floor and ceiling. "Maybe they think that will turn off the traps."

"Will it?"

" Yeah, some that - oh crap!" It suddenly occurred to him that he didn't know how long the dwarfs had been at work here before his squad had arrived. His feet started moving before he had completed the thought. "Run!"

"What the- ? Get back here you damn coward!" the boss shouted after him as he sprinted away from the prospective breach.

The stone underneath Kner's feet vibrated, producing a long, grinding groan that came from all around. He stumbled as the floor bucked. Sometimes being right sucked. The dwarfs really had undermined the corridor, and now it was coming loose at the cut they made.

A crumbling, breaking noise behind him accompanied the moment when the floor dropped out under him for real. For an instant, he felt weightless - not that he appreciated the feeling. He should probably brace for impact and protect-

Ow. Something snapped in his foot, sending lances of pain up his right leg, and the noise of the corridor crash-landing was deafening. Stunned, he needed a moment to regain his senses. He was face-down on the uneven ground, one foot probably broken, with what looked like one of his teeth in the dust not far away. His other leg felt numb from the knee down, which couldn't be good.

Small debris shifted underneath him as he slowly turned his head towards the ceiling. Riddled with cracks, missing tiles and crystals, the corridor nevertheless remained in one piece. He needed to move before the dungeon's fortification magic faded away entirely and he got turned into a bloody pancake by collapsing masonry.

Given his injuries, he'd need help. Crap. With painful effort, he sat up to face the chorus of whimpers and moans coming from further down the fallen corridor.

His companions, too stupid to follow him when he had started running, were still more or less in the same place he had left them. Well, they were now a few paces deeper down and scattered all over the floor. Or smeared over the floor, in the case of the goblins that had cushioned the reaperbot's fall.

The ones that hadn't been flattened seemed to be in better shape than him, though. One advantage to being light and small. Not that they'd be winning any prizes at running or jumping soon. Or at fighting, which was kind of bad since a bunch of ropes were now dangling down from the broken edge of the corridor.

He looked over at the reaperbot. With its legs damaged, the thing was flailing around uselessly, a danger only to its nearby allies. Not helping.

A short figure, surprisingly mobile despite the intricate suit of full plate armour it was wearing, slid down the central rope. The dwarf took a few steps forward and stopped in front of the closest goblin, who began crawling backwards. "Survivors," she noted, her voice carrying through the underground as two squat warriors in simpler armour landed behind her.

The blade of her weapon whistled through the air in a bright arc, blood fountained, and a severed green head dropped to the ground.

"Get to work," she ordered, her voice even. Following her lead, the soldiers drew their weapons and strode toward the injured monsters.

"You fucking bitch!" Lorn yelled as the dwarfs approached. "Scared of a real fight? Come here if you dare!" Leaning against the wall, he managed to use his club as a crutch and raised himself to his feet.

The leader looked at one of her men and tilted her head in the large troll's direction.

"What, send an underling to do your job? I thought you surfacers were supposed to have honour! Get your smelly arse over here you -" his eyes widened when the soldier in question pulled out a crossbow from behind his back and got closer, staying just out of the troll's reach.

Lorn tried to duck but was too slow, and the bolt made a sickening squelching sound as it entered his skull through his eye. He collapsed, limbs twitching in his death throes.

Kner shuddered. Right now, he was really glad he had run and was

the furthest away from the invaders.

"Your Majesty, I require a recharge for my staff," Torian said as he approached Ami from the side, weaving through the messengers and assistants that surrounded her. "I'm happy to report that I have neutralised yet another group of invaders."

Wordlessly, Ami reached out and put her hand on the proffered weapon. Still concentrating on the map before her, she let power flow into the staff until she could feel resistance from its internal reservoir.

"Thank you, your Majesty."

Fighting was going on around several of the breaches, but there were no serious enemy breakthroughs yet. Imp under attack - already too late to save. A water basin broken open, washing away her own troops. Ami quickly patched the leak with a freezing spell. Jail break alert?

She took a closer look at that one. Oh, just one of the prisons that Jadeite had turned into regular corridors, complete with traps, and then reverted to their true form once the dwarfs were inside. Another group of invaders was trying to get them out. She foiled the escape attempt by transporting the captives to a prison deeper within her dungeon. Now -

Massive damage to her dungeon, some deaths, followed by more deaths. Alarmed, she rushed to the site. She found a fallen, crumbling section of corridor and was just in time to see a dwarf swing his pickaxe at an injured troll, who saved his head by sacrificing an arm to block the blade.

She reacted almost on pure reflex, bringing out her Keeper hand and batting away the offender. When the dwarf went flying and the hand dispersed into a spray of droplets, she realised she had perhaps overdone it. Hoping that she hadn't accidentally killed someone, she turned her attention to the crossbow-wielding enemy who was hanging back. No wards. A quick energy drain later and he

collapsed to his knees. Now to tend to the wounded.

Wait, there was a blood-covered orc barely managing to lift his upper body off the ground with one arm. His other hand was holding a dagger and stabbing frantically at a prone dwarf. Ami felt her heart skip a beat before she realised that the victim's armour was holding, at least against the dagger. The rock embedded in her side could only have been thrown by the half-disabled reaperbot.

She lightly slapped the orc's dagger away and whisked the two heavily injured dwarfs away to abbot Durval, eliciting an enraged roar from her underling. Next, the crippled orc and his detached arm went to Monteraine, and then she transported the remaining wounded to Snyder.

Having rescued the survivors of that incident, Ami compared her mental image of the dungeon with the map of incursions before her. With the collapsed corridor as the final piece of the puzzle, the hit-and-run skirmishing tactics of her opponents were suddenly making sense.

"Complete eradication," she muttered under her breath.

"Your Majesty?" Torian asked. His expression brightened. "Do you wish me to wipe out-"

"It's what the dwarfs are trying to do," Ami elaborated. "They aren't heading straight for the dungeon heart, they want to destroy the dungeon piece by piece!"

"Is that even possible?" the warlock asked incredulously.

"It's an approach I had dismissed as impractical," Ami admitted. "In economic terms, it doesn't make sense to maintain an army of imps large enough to pull it off successfully."

"But dwarfs don't require mana and dig just as well," Torian pondered, raising a finger to his chin. "Staying on the outside of the dungeon whenever possible *would* be far safer than any intrusion." He stayed quiet for a moment. "But that would all be futile in the end unless they could claim territory?"

Ami grimaced and blocked a passage with ice before she answered "They are reaffirming their ownership of these lands. Symbols stamped into the walls." She figured they were emblems of local lords, as each of the three main thrusts was using a different one. In any case, they conveyed enough authority that her own reclaiming efforts slowed down to a crawl.

"Stamps, really? I see." Torian voice seemed to convey a degree of contempt. "If you wish to concentrate on the challenging problems instead, I will be more than happy to deal with this issue for you, your Majesty."

"Please do," Ami blurted out immediately, relieved that *someone* apparently had a solution. Her own would have involved exposing imps to enemy fire as they desperately tried to deface the offending emblems. In light of the dwarfs' strategy, she needed to check on the south-eastern part of the mountain as soon as possible. So far, it had been mostly quiet aside from imps being attacked. What were the dwarfs up to that they had avoided drawing her attention? She had to-

"Mercury, some help up here?" she suddenly heard Cathy's telepathic message. *"Largest wave of enemies yet coming straight for my position!"*

Last edited: May 27, 2017

Surface Battle, Part 1

Originally on 2014-05-16T17:07:00

Freezing rain poured down on the battlefield, a rocky slope where clouds of unnatural mist billowed over the sparse grass and moss. Rainwater ran downhill in meandering trickles, cascading off rocks as it searched a path through the uneven, debris-covered terrain. Worse, it found its way into the clothes and armours of the combatants, soaking them to the bone.

Cathy was no exception. Shivering from the wind chill, she landed close to a dwarf, splashing him with the mud fountaining up around her feet. The startled soldier had barely begun turning his head in her direction when her punch rattled his breastplate, lifted him off his feet, and launched him downhill.

The swordswoman did her best to ignore the hint of guilt in the back of her mind. He'd bowled over the dwarfs behind him, so he landed softly and would be fine. Probably. Damn, she hated having to hurt good guys. Fighting off heroes who had come to drive a Keeper from their land wasn't something she had ever imagined herself doing. Not so long ago, she would have reacted with violence to the suggestion she would ever do such a thing.

"Boss! Help!" An orcish voice drew her attention to the right.

Through a wall of dwarfs, she caught a glimpse of two of her soldiers standing with their backs to a rock wall. The orcs in damaged, blood-covered armour didn't look as if they could hold out much longer. "On my way!" she called, her shout distracting the dwarfs and buying the orcs a few more moments.

Alerted by her shout, five enemies broke from the encirclement and faced her way, watching the fog intently. The warriors wore breastplates and mail shirts that didn't fit quite right, but they were professional enough to react quickly and drop into proper combat stances. Their eyes went wide when Cathy got close enough that the mist no longer concealed her form. "Black knight!" one of them

warned, taking a step back.

It didn't help him at all when she closed in and swung her long-handled maul at leg height. With one foot steadied against the rock for leverage, she brought the strength of her powered armour to bear and swept all of them aside, sending them sprawling.

The rest of the dwarfs gasped at the sight and hurried to turn towards the new threat. "It's her! Get her!" one of the them shouted as he lunged at her with his pickaxe held high.

Cathy intercepted him with a kick to his chest that sent him back the way he had come. She followed him with a jump, landing between the orcs and the remaining dwarfs. Risky, but she should be fast enough.

"Argh! She's-"

"Go! Togethe-"

Wielding her weapon like a staff, she held it horizontally and pushed forward. Metal rang as the haft of her weapon slammed into a hastily-formed wall of shields. With her armour granting her the strength of a horned reaper in addition to Mercury's own enchantments, she simply kept walking, shoving the grunting, resisting dwarfs backwards. With only three steps, she had gained enough speed to send them tumbling, the sloped terrain working in her favour.

Three dwarfs remained and backed away. Two broke and ran, but the one further back blew twice into a signal horn as he retreated. "She's over here!" he managed to call out before she slammed her fist into his jaw.

Quickly, she checked whether any of the dwarfs scattered in the dirt around her were getting up again, doing her best to ignore their moans of pain and cries for help. Any bones she had broken should keep them safely out of the fight. It was for their own good, in a way. Oh, and someone had risen to his feet and was staggering towards her.

He didn't get far, as one of the bloodied orcs she had saved slammed his club into the dwarf's thigh from behind. A sickening crack later, and he was writhing on the ground, howling in pain as he held his leg.

The orc grinned at Cathy and gave her a thumbs-up as he kicked the downed dwarf for good measure.

With the orcs watching her back, the swordswoman used the opportunity to catch her breath for a moment. She renewed the Shabon Spray fog covering the battle and then let her aching arms dangle. Her powered armour was great and all, but when it moved at inhuman speeds, it sometimes felt as if it was trying to rip her limbs out.

"Thanks for the save, boss," one of the pink-skinned warrior said as got close enough to be heard over the noises of the battlefield. He raised his helmet's visor, a scowl furrowing his oversized brow. "We should leave. Bunch of midgets coming here. Must have heard the horn."

"I'm aware." A loose double line of twenty dwarfs stomping directly towards her was hard to miss. "I'll handle them. You two, head over there." Cathy pointed at a horned metal figure that towered over the other nearby combatants. Crowded by enemies, it was at the centre of one of the skirmishes that made up the ill-defined front line. "Stop them from slipping past the bot!"

"Sure, boss." With a final worried glance at the dwarfs running toward Cathy, the orcs saluted and ran off.

The enemies arrived, and Cathy leaned to the right, letting a blow whistle past her. A knee to the chin sent her attacker stumbling backwards.

"Flank her!"

Cathy didn't give them the opportunity. She swung her weapon at the first soldier trying to bypass her on the left. Shield and bone crumbled under the impact of the blurring maul, and her opponent fell, howling in pain. An axe blade scraped over her greaves as she

darted back out of reach, almost tripping her.

More cautious, she continued her attack, felling an enemy with each strike. She wondered how many casualties it would take to make the dwarfs break off their assault. The bulk of their forces hadn't even engaged yet. There were too many dwarfs on the slope for her to properly count, but at a rough estimate, she was facing more than there were goblins in the dungeon. Which would put their number at around four hundred or so.

She wished, not for the first time, that Mercury could have sent her more than twelve reaperbots. That would make her feel more confident about her forces being outnumbered four to one, which was never good. Especially when over half of said forces were goblins.

A dwarf kneeling in the mud over a fallen comrade froze in terror as she skidded to a halt near him. She strode past without a second glance. Even without Mercury's orders, she wouldn't lower herself to go after enemies who were recovering wounded and stunned comrades.

"She's coming this way!"

As long as she didn't let herself get surrounded, defeating the soldiers who opposed her was - well, not effortless, since the powered armour put quite a strain on her body, but not too challenging either. She would have been causing a terrible bloodbath if she had been using an edged weapon.

"Fall back!"

Likewise, the reaperbots didn't have any scythe blades attached to their hilts. She watched one of them spin in a circle with his staff held out, batting away any surrounding dwarfs that didn't dodge in time. More dwarfs poured in from behind it, hacking at the back of its knees. Most of their blows just bounced off the metal without doing any damage.

"Regroup! She has to make a mistake at some poin- argh!"

She stepped over her latest unconscious foe. About forty enemies per reaperbot. So far, she had only lost one of them, and that was to a freak hit from a catapult. Umbra should be dealing with the remaining artillery emplacements, so that wouldn't happen again. Add to that the advantage of high ground and the banks of Shabon Spray fog, and Cathy was feeling optimistic about her defensive line holding.

"Shoot her! Shoot her now!"

"I would if I could see her!"

"You are going to hit our own men in this mist!" someone else protested.

One of the heavy automatons slipped in the mud, its metal soles poorly suited for the rough terrain. It toppled, and a few of the more courageous dwarfs capitalised on the opportunity by giving it a good shove. The construct started rolling downhill, grasping futilely at the ground and picking up speed like a miniature avalanche. With shouts of alarm, the dwarfs in its path scattered.

Cathy grimaced. Well, the defence would hold unless something like *that* happened. Assuming that the reaperbot survived its descent, it still wouldn't make its way back up soon enough to be useful. She broke into a run, intending to take its place at the front.

"Aiiie! It's her! She's unstoppable! Run! Run!" One of the dwarfs shouted as he spotted her, turning tail and fleeing.

Well, she certainly didn't mind dwarfs *not* getting in her way for a change.

"Don't panic! Just handle her like one of the tin cans!" contradicted a calm voice that was used to commanding.

Treat her like one of the reaperbots? Hah, they'd find out to their detriment that she was much more agile than the automatons. Cathy turned her attention to the speaker. Clearly an officer of some sort, wearing an armour engraved with decorative line patterns.

"For Nimbadnur! Charge!" the dwarf pointed forward with his

massive axe, a two-handed weapon with a half-moon shaped blade that was designed purely for battle.

Air whistled past Cathy as she jumped over the incoming tide of murderous, armoured dwarfs and headed straight for their commanding officer. Breaking the enemy morale was more important than taking down a few more of the rank and file soldiers. Not to mention safer than wading straight into the thick of things.

To his credit, her opponent didn't flinch at her approach. His horned helmet only covered his face from the nose up, and she could see him press his lips together in determination. "Split, scatter, surround!" he instructed as he took a wide-legged stance, the six braids hanging off his chin bobbing.

"Sir!"

"Baron!"

Cathy smiled under her helmet as she heard the worried exclamations. A captive dwarven noble could be just the hostage Mercury needed to put an end to this fight! With a glance, she evaluated her opponent. Weight shifted forward, hands far apart on the handle of his weapon. Yeah, he was planning to parry, rather than dodge. Without warning, she launched herself forward.

As she had expected, her opponent raised his own cleaver, one hand steadying the back of its blade to catch the blow on its edge.

Their weapons clashed, screeching as she pushed through her opponent's block. The effort drove him down to one knee, and even she felt a little rattled and unbalanced.

With a wet splash, the mallet-shaped top half of her maul landed in the mud.

Blinking at the remaining half of her weapon, Cathy belatedly realised that she had not actually broken through the noble's defence. Or batted his axe out of his hands. With a curse, she ducked just in time to get a great close-up view of its blade as it whistled past her head. A band of light blue metal glittered along its

edge where the paint had been scratched.

Someone with an adamantine-lined weapon could parry with the edge, Cathy thought sourly. The thing would also cut through her armour, and she back-pedalled rapidly out of its reach. Which brought her in range of the dwarfs she'd bypassed earlier. Keeping one eye on the dwarf leader, she whirled around to parry a blow from behind. The enemy pickaxe came to a stop against the handle of her destroyed weapon, and she grabbed the pick-shaped part to pull it from her opponent's hand.

He didn't let go. Attached to his armour with a locked gauntlet, the pickaxe remained stuck to her opponent. Too pressed for time to abandon her plan, Cathy yanked hard, pulling the soldier off his feet, and swung him in a circle. Feet flailing in the air, the screaming dwarf proved to be effective at gaining her some space, since his comrades were reluctant to hit him.

She let him go before she could get dizzy from all the turning, releasing him in the direction of the dwarven noble. Now to retreat and find another weapon before the dwarfs could close in again.

Someone tossed a net over her. Annoying, but she could just rip that apart before the dwarfs closed in and - wait, they were running away from her?

Cathy's eyes widened. Not fleeing from her, but from the small round object rolling in her direction. Bomb!

She tripped as she took an instinctive step back, her legs tangled in the net. "Crap! Shabon Spray Freezing!"

Magic borrowed from the empress rushed through her body and shot towards the explosive. The pillar of blue light rushing from Cathy's palms solidified as it struck the ground, turning into a wall of ice that towered over her.

The bomb struck the obstacle with a soft thud and exploded with a painful, deafening boom, accompanied by an orange flare. Shards of metal made buzzing noises as they shot through the air, and splinters of ice pelted the swordswoman.

She sat up and stared at the crack-covered wall, her heart beating rapidly. Damn. That had been too close. She had been lucky Mercury hadn't been drawing on their shared mana source at the same time. Damn dwarfs. Still, she had to act confident. They wouldn't flee if she couldn't demoralise them. She stood, demonstratively brushing the dirt off her armour. "So much for your brilliant plan," she mocked.

"The distraction, anyway," the noble quipped right back. Then, he gave the large, precariously-balanced boulder tied to the net a good kick.

Five staff-wielding silhouettes stood in a semi-circle around a stone altar, backlit by the ember-filled braziers that bathed the room in a red light. Each of the high-collared figures occupied one point of the vaguely star-shaped diagram etched into the floor.

The dark general floating on the opposite side of the ritual chamber looked less than impressed. Arms crossed, he singled out the central warlock with his stare. "Torian. I hope you have a good reason for calling me away from the battle."

"Obviously." The chief warlock's tone made it clear he would have rolled his eyes at the dark general if he had dared. "We will ruin the enemy's foolish strategy in one fell blow! Observe!"

He gestured with his staff at the three metal rods standing upright on the altar, resting on their disc-shaped base. They toppled and revealed each a different emblem on their dusty underside.

"Those things," Torian lectured, "are three of the stamps the invaders use to mark the walls, not unlike a noble pressing his seal into wax. A crude but quick way to reinforce their leaders' claim on the land. Instead of a skilled artisan chipping away with a chisel for hours, any soldier with a stamp and a hammer can leave marks all over the place. That has to be delightfully offensive to dwarven sensibilities, really! Still, it accomplishes what they are trying to do."

Jadeite glanced briefly at the stamps before focusing on the warlock

again. "The point being?"

"So impatient! Well, as fast as their method is, it suffers from an exploitable flaw. Each stamp produces identical marks. Are you following me?"

"I'm familiar with the weaknesses of mass-produced garbage," Jadeite said, nodding.

"Good. So are the dwarfs, annoying little midgets that they are. They are using differently-sized stamps, paint, and scratches to add some individuality to each mark. That doesn't offer anywhere near as the protection that properly hand-crafting the things would," the warlock furrowed his neatly-trimmed brows, "but that is, unfortunately, still enough to prevent us from blowing up all of the emblems with a single ritual."

"And you have found a way to keep the energy of the spell focused despite the counter-measures?" Jadeite asked, sounding a little more interested.

Torian shook his head. "Not exactly, but I have found a workaround. While we can't directly affect the marks, we can still use each of them to find all the others. After that, well, that's where you come in."

Three of his assistant warlocks took a step forward, grabbed one stamp each, and brought them down hard on the altar. It's surface rippled like liquid tar, and when they lifted the tools again, three perfect emblem-shaped impressions were left in the black glass.

The fourth warlock approached and dropped a nail into the centre of the triangle formed by the three impressions. Aside from having been split half-way until it resembled a tiny tuning fork, it didn't look any different from regular nails one might find in a carpenter's toolbox.

Jadeite raised an eyebrow. "I don't sense any magic from that."

"That's because it's not magical," Torian said. "I assume duplicating it will be no problem for someone who can conjure up thousands of fully-functional eyes?" Not waiting for an answer, he continued "Now

go ahead and use the emblems to sense where their copies are. We have a battle to turn around!"

Ami had her eyes closed, her lips pressed together in a thin, unhappy line. In her mental view of the dungeon, steel girders slammed into place, reinforcing a ceiling that groaned under the weight of the rock above it. Her opponents had no compunctions about digging into the load-bearing parts of the mountain, keeping her distracted with staving off collapses while people were fighting and dying elsewhere.

Drawing entirely on the gold-fuelled magic of her dungeon heart, she filled the concerned caverns with the caustic, corrupted version of her her fog. Alarmed cries and rapid footsteps rewarded her as a group of dwarfs spotted the hazardous obstacle and ran. Area denial was the key here.

"The updated list of highest-priority emergencies, your Majesty," one of the warlock assistants interrupted her train of thought.

Ami glanced at the small page of paper he'd left on the battle map, and quickly worked her way through each item, moving troops and the wounded.

By now, she had a managed to piece together a much better idea of what her enemies were up to. The half of their army participating in the assault, anyway. There were three distinct groups digging into the mountain from different directions, each one under the command of a different noble. At least, that was what she concluded from the markings on their equipment. It would explain the differences between their tactics.

The group to the south-west, for example, was trying the most traditional approach. Large groups that breached the dungeon walls and invaded. In a way, they were the easiest to deal with, since there were less separate incursions to track. Her troops could team up and deal with the incursions more or less on their own. Of course, that didn't paint the whole picture, since the enemy had also brought heavy mining equipment, such as large drills that needed

several dwarfs to operate. Originally, they had tried to go in deep, but a few hit and run attacks by Mareki had flooded their descending tunnels, which put a stop to that.

"That runaway wagon just exploded!" someone shouted on the upper floors, and Ami was forced to spend a few precious seconds running damage control.

The saboteurs from the east were taking the opposite approach from the previous group. Small teams of three dwarfs each were roaming about, destabilising large volumes of rock, placing explosives and sniping any imps they could find. In short, they were making as much trouble for her as the other two groups put together. She had no reason to assume that they numbered less than their allied forces either - about five-hundred dwarfs each, by her estimations. It explained why she found it impossible to keep track of all the tiny squads. Their one redeeming feature was their lack of combat power. Too small to risk confrontations, they focused on property damage, rather than on inflicting casualties.

Ami wanted them gone nevertheless, and had picked up on their main weakness. With only three dwarfs to rotate through the strenuous task of digging, they lacked endurance. Even the various potions they were carrying could only slow down how quickly they tired out. It meant that whenever she forced them to make a detour, they couldn't move much further to find an alternate target.

Corrupted Shabon Spray fog was great for denying them the use of existing tunnels, and since she had observed the dwarfs being very good at avoiding such hazards, she didn't even need to feel guilty about using the horrible stuff. That was a reactive measure though, and didn't really stop them from collapsing her tunnels. For that, she had been improvising.

She concentrated, and gold flowed from her treasure chamber. The section of dungeon floor she was focusing on trembled, tiles parting and lifting as an elongated shape rose from below with a grinding noise. A giant sword glittered on the ground, but not of the type she had wielded with her Keeper hand before. She had adapted her sword room to produce a thin, narrow weapon that resembled a foil or spike instead. Less practical for cutting down enemies, but she

didn't plan on using it for fighting. Instead, she drove the metres of pointy metal right into the dungeon wall.

In practice, she wasn't doing anything more sophisticated than sloppily nailing her corridors to the underlying rock. It wasn't a perfect solution by a long shot, and she couldn't afford either the attention or the gold to turn every corridor into something that resembled a porcupine, but it stopped the dungeon from collapsing the moment it was undermined. Now she needed to build more-

"Mercury, help!"

The urgency in Cathy's transmission startled Ami, immediately drawing her Keeper sight to the area. She gasped when she saw the armoured figure skidding and bouncing downhill at a break-neck pace, dragged onward by a rolling boulder. "Oh no!"

Frightened for the blonde's life, Ami concentrated and transported her out of the net by transferring her into Keeper storage. Momentum. Too much momentum to just drop her off in the infirmary. It needed to be bled it off first, and quickly. Aiming for a deep water basin, Ami released the swordswoman.

A loud splash later, Cathy was underwater and slowed abruptly. She made jerky swimming motions while bubbles escaped from her helmet. With the way she was flailing her limbs, they probably weren't broken, and Ami transported her to the infirmary.

Cathy dropped to her knees, coughing so much she bent over, and water spilled out of her armour's joints.

Ami noted the mild pink tinge of the growing puddle with worry. *"Cathy, are you all right?"*

The coughing from underneath the helmet grew angrier, but also less intense as the blonde straightened. *"What does it,"* another cough, *"look like?"*she snapped, though she stood up under her own power. *"Sorry. I've felt better, but I'm really angry about falling for that trick."*

"That's a relief." Ami clasped her hands underneath her cloak. *"Just*

let Snyder heal you, and-"

"No, send me back," Cathy demanded. *"I can still fight!"*

Ami blinked. *"But you are hurt!"*

"The enemy won't take a break just because I'm not in top shape. We'll lose before I get out of this armour and back in!"

Ami hesitated. She didn't want to send Cathy out to fight wounded, but the swordswoman had a point. It was a painful reminder that she was neglecting urgent duties while she was having this conversation. Besides, someone able to cast Shabon Spray out there on the battlefield would indeed be invaluable. She hung her head. *"All right, but be careful, please!"*

"I will. Can you drop me off near the breaches?"

Ami searched the battlefield for a spot behind friendly lines and complied, but not before noticing that her troops were precariously close to being overwhelmed. Even armed with magic, Cathy wasn't going to turn that situation around all on her own.

Deciding that she needed to assist, Ami briefly checked if there were no higher-priority emergencies. She stabilised a pillar damaged by an explosive charge before turning her attention to the tunnels underneath the surface battle. There were traps that should have prevented a situation like that. Why were they not working?

Power failure. She sighed. She could fix the broken power lines, if she took the time to search where they were damaged, or she could improvise and throw some magic at the problem to make it go away. Or, more precisely, a magical minion. A mere exertion of her will summoned a pale grey figure before her.

"Ehh? Your Majesty!" The hairless, fin-eared youma seemed to shrink under Ami's red-eyed gaze.

"Lishika! You'll help Cathy stop the enemy on the surface," Ami said, half of her attention occupied with rewiring the power grid.

"M- me? But I'm not good at fighting!" Lishika protested quietly, eyes

shifting left and right as if looking for an escape route.

Ami finished her preparations. "After I transport you, you will see a vertical metal rod. Grab it and keep zapping it when Cathy tells you to," she instructed.

The youma relaxed a little. "All right. How long do I need to-"

"Now!" Ami instructed, and Lishika disappeared.

Problem hopefully handled, Ami dealt with a request for evacuation from a flanked group of trolls while she pondered how to best deal with the third group of invaders, which used middle-sized teams of soldiers. Perhaps they could be denied entry?

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Surface Battle, Part 2

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"Next!" the voice of the sergeant called out, carrying far in the narrow tunnel. Mosek gratefully lowered his pickaxe and pressed himself against the wall to let the next digger pass. He took off his helmet and raised a proffered wine bottle to his lips, the taste of the liquid washing away some of his tiredness.

"Good work," one of the other soldiers said as he patted him on the back. "We'll be through any moment now."

Mosek wiped the sweat from his brow, frowning. Was that supposed to cheer him up? It didn't. In fact, it was terrifying and he wished he was back at his farm. Scraping lichen off wet rocks wasn't any less exhausting than mining, but at least he wasn't doing it in chafing, ill-fitting armour. Also, there weren't death and torture waiting for him around every corner back home. Military life looked far more glorious from afar.

Hard work aside, his group had been lucky so far. The worst they had encountered was an imp - a hideous creature with grotesquely large, dead eyes, the light on its helmet casting intimidating shadows over its face. Keleb had shot the bloodthirsty little monster before it could go for them, but there were far worse creatures waiting for them underneath this mountain. He shuddered and didn't even want to think about the Dark Empress herself, an evil powerful enough to challenge the plans of gods.

"Put your helmet back on, we are about to-"

There was a loud clang as the miner's pick broke through the dungeon's brick wall and bounced off a steel surface behind it.

"Tangled beards! Where did that come from?" the miner shouted in confusion.

Mosek stared in surprise. He would never have missed sensing that

much metal through the rock when he had been at point digging, which meant it was a recent addition. "She knows we are here!" he muttered in a strangled voice, jumping to the obvious conclusion.

"Nah, don't worry, it's just some goblins on the other side," Ashkad reassured him, one of her palms touching the bare rock. The copper-skinned artisan had her eyes closed in concentration. "The obstacle is a plate on rails, like a sliding door. Ingenious."

"I'd admire it more if it wasn't in our way," the sergeant grumbled.

Mosek couldn't help feeling relieved. Enchanted picks could neutralise the reinforcements on dungeon walls, making them no harder to dig through than regular walls. This didn't help a whole lot when all you had was a pick and there was a steel wall in your way. He wouldn't have to enter the dungeon proper just yet. Sure, he knew that the enemy Keeper needed to be stopped - never mind the insistent lies of her minions - and he had no intention of shirking his duties, but he still preferred to avoid danger for as long as possible.

"It's not as if she can afford to armour the entire dungeon," Ashkad said. "We can dig sideways and go around it."

"Pointless. The corridor will be swarming with troops by now," the sergeant dismissed the suggestion. "We need to try somewhere else. Pull back, men!"

Mosek, resting safely at the end of the group, suddenly found itself at its front as it reversed direction. Not that he minded leading them away from the danger.

"And collapse the tunnel, we don't want any enemies pouring in behind us!"

"On it."

Even in complete darkness, the dwarven diggers struck with precision and skill. It only took them a few deft strikes before the rock collapsed inwards, rumbling and stirring up a cloud of dust behind the departing soldiers. As the debris rained to the ground, Mosek thought he heard a quiet clicking noise that came from

ahead. "Did you hear that?"

"It's one of those freaky rats with a backpack!" someone shouted behind him. A hurled stone landed close to the animal, and it disappeared underneath some rubble.

"What I heard didn't sound like a rat." If anything, the odd noise reminded him of a millipede. It hadn't been a single, defined sound, but more something like hundreds of small objects striking at the same time. His imagination conjured up an enormous, spindly insect whose legs could touch the tunnel walls in multiple places at once, all at the same time. He shuddered. What a time to be reminded of monsters from ancient myths.

"Stop, there's definitely something wrong," the sergeant said, holding up his hand. "What are those glowing specks?"

The passage looked as if a swarm of red fireflies had alighted on its walls, each one several steps apart from the others.

"I'd say embers, but they are getting brighter," Ashkad said, her voice betraying her unease. "Mosek, watch out! There's one on your stamp!"

Eyes widening, the miner pulled the tool off his back and held it as far away from his face as he could while still getting a good look at the source of the glow. There, stuck between the intricate ridges that formed Count Ornish's crest, he saw an odd nail split half-way down the middle. Faint veins of glowing red energy condensed out of the air and seeped into the iron, which channelled it into the tool below. Even as he watched, the masterfully-crafted lines deformed and ran like water, slowly turning the crest into a blotchy, unrecognisable mess.

His eyes darted back to the tunnel walls, and he paid special attention to the positioning of the glowing spots. His jaw dropped in dismay. "They, they are attacking our territory markers!"

The sergeant rushed toward the closest glowing spot. After a cursory examination, he started cursing loudly, confirming Mosek's speculation.

From far ahead in the tunnel came a very faint rustling noise, like rodents moving in the dark. Dim aquamarine flickers brightened the walls, not unlike clouds glowing from a far-away lightning storm. Despite the pretty colour, Mosek felt dread as he recognised the exact shade of Mercury's dungeon tiles and made the connection with the rat. "The evil one is reclaiming the land! We need to get out of here!"

"Troops, regroup around me," Cathy shouted, waving her arm for attention. She stood on an exposed rock needle, visible from afar - provided you were an ally and could see through the magical mist. Her elevated vantage point also gave her a great view of the battlefield, and the situation wasn't looking good. The majority of the reaperbots under her command was missing, and she suspected that the invaders had used the same trick on them as they had on her. Which, now that she thought about it, was a blatant imitation of Mercury chaining a temple bell to her first reaper. Her own troops had lost ground while she was away, and the dwarfs kept pushing. Right now, they were using their superior numbers to send soldiers around the left and right flanks of her force, preparing for an envelopment manoeuvre.

"Ready," Lishika's telepathic, message echoed in her head, sounding a little uncertain.

Cathy evaluated the situation. By falling back towards her position, her warriors were ceding ground, but they were also lowering the risk of being encircled. She drew an imaginary border through several landmarks she had memorised and determined that all of her forces were on the correct side. *"Our troops are in the clear! Go right ahead!"* she replied to the youma. Our troops who are still alive, she added in private, spotting several pink and green-skinned bodies lying behind enemy lines. She wouldn't be able to hold this position if Mercury's plan didn't work.

She almost missed the moment when dwarfs started toppling without visible cause, forming a straight line of prone bodies across the enemy formations. Cries of alarm and confusion replaced the regular rhythm of marching boots as the advance faltered before the

invisible obstacle. Dwarfs swivelled their heads at a frantic pace, trying to figure out who was attacking them. Those on the ground shouted in pain and confusion, prompting some soldiers to rush forward to assist their comrades. The rescuers fell over too as they moved over the underground corridor, brought low by the electromagnets within pulling on their armour.

Cathy let out the breath she had been holding. The impassible zone had appeared close behind the front line, trapping a manageable number of dwarfs between itself and her troops. Unlike other noises muffled by the mist, her voice carried over the battlefield loud and clear as she addressed the stuck soldiers.. "Dwarfs of Nimbadnur! In the name of Empress Mercury, I order you to lay down your weapons! Those who do will be allowed to leave unharmed!"

A barrage of slurs and insults answered her as the bulk of the dwarven army turned into a sea of raised fists and brandished weapons. The dwarfs actually trapped expressed their defiance less enthusiastically, but none of them looked ready to surrender.

"Yeah, that worked about as well as expected," Cathy muttered to herself. With a sigh, she raised her replacement weapon - she had made sure *this* war hammer had a steel handle - and signalled her troops. "Soldiers, charge!"

She hopped off her perch and threw herself into the fray. At the front of her forces, she cut a path through the opposition, her sweeping blows hurling dwarfs left and right.

Unable to retreat, they fought with reckless ferocity. One of them threw himself at her without even trying to mount a defence. She knocked him away, but not before his axe had struck a dent into her breastplate. Others tried to circle her and risked taking blows from the orcs behind her just to strike at an unguarded spot.

"Stay away from her, it's pointless!" ordered some dwarf in the back she couldn't see.

Cathy smiled under her helmet. Good. They were recognising the futility of their efforts.

"Take down as many of the others as you can instead!"

Well, crap. It seemed their continued ignorance would have been more useful, after all.

Dwarfs moved away from her, seeking easier opposition. With neither side significantly outnumbering the other, the melee devolved rapidly into a confusing mess of small, clashing formations.

Cathy dispatched another opponent, wondering how to turn the situation more into her favour, when she picked out faint but persistent cheering noises. She turned towards the magnets, dreading to see what her enemies were so happy about.

The cheering got louder, spreading to more throats, and then a bright white light lit up the mist. The noise of the battle lowered a little as its participants turned to look at the phenomenon.

An armoured knight, too tall to be a dwarf, was holding a glowing two-hander up over his head. Around him, the veils of concealing fog ripped apart and vanished like a bad dream. The blade's light faded away shortly after banishing the last of the mist.

All around, the cheering of the dwarfs redoubled. Without the glare, Cathy could make out more details of the figure.

She drew in a sharp breath she recognised the face underneath the open visor. *"Mercury! The Avatar is here!"*

"What?" Mercury's mental reply arrived at once, and she was talking almost too fast to understand. *"Busy. People trapped under cave-in. Can you talk him down?"*

"I'll do my best," Cathy promised with a sour look at the figure in shiny armour.

By now, some of her own troops had recognised the Avatar. The goblins wailed in dismay, almost as loudly as the dwarfs were cheering.

Cathy started walking toward the Avatar with fake confidence, and none of her opponents tried to bar her way as she walked closer to

their champion.

Yellow cloth draped over Amadeus' full plate mail waved in the wind as he strode forward to meet her, deft steps carrying him right past the dwarven bodies stuck to the ground. The self-satisfied smirk on his lips grew more distinctive.

Cathy stopped a good distance away. She wasn't magnet-proof proof like he seemed to be now. "What are you doing here? You had an agreement with my Empress!" she challenged.

"My duty to prevent further unnecessary bloodshed here takes precedence," he stated, his voice calm and steady, with only the merest hint of an apology in his tone. He narrowed his eyes at the blonde. "Yield."

"Oh, that's bullshit! She's just a victim of circumstances!" Cathy shouted. "The blame for any bloodshed here lies entirely on the dwarfs!" Perhaps the champion of the Light deserved more respect, but right now, she was too angry to care. Damn it, couldn't he let Mercury get a break? She hadn't even fully recovered from all the previous trouble, and the Light had to know what she had recently gone through. The Avatar was supposed to be good and fair, and him siding with the dwarfs here certainly wasn't!

"Yield," Amadeus repeated as he kept striding toward her, shifting his grip on his sword into a ready position.

"Make me!" Trying not to let her nervousness show, Cathy stood her ground. Yeah, challenge the greatest warrior of the world to a fight, she reproached herself. Great job talking him down, by the way.

From her brief battles with Amadeus on the Avatar Islands, she knew that her power armour and enchantments were not enough to even the odds. Okay, he didn't have his mantle this time, so perhaps she could - nah, no use lying to herself. Unless this was an imposter, she was going to get her arse kicked. Not that it mattered. *Someone* needed to stand up for Mercury, and if it was her - well, Mercury was her liege lord, so she was duty-bound to defend her anyway. The fact that the blue-haired girl had managed to gain her respect just meant she had even less reason to hesitate.

The Avatar moved first, a blur of white and yellow. Cathy blocked his opening swing with the hilt of her weapon and skidded backwards, her feet leaving furrows in the mud.

She noticed a small gash in the steel where she had blocked his sword. Did it have an adamantine edge too? Fuck. She might have to pull her blows in order to avoid damaging her weapon further. Her arms moved on instinct, propelling the war hammer through the air in a whistling arc.

The Avatar took a single step out of its path. She pressed her attack, striking faster. Metal clanged against metal, and this time it was Amadeus who was pushed backwards as he redirected the force of the blow.

Their weapons met again and again, moving almost too fast for Cathy to follow their movements. Both combatants circled each other, vying for position with sudden bursts of motion. With each abrupt change of direction, their boots sprayed wet dirt over the area around them, prompting the surrounding fighters to give their duel an even wider berth.

Cathy, bleeding from a shallow cut in her side, thought that she should be coming out a little ahead in their lightning-quick exchanges. Her opponent *was* slower than her, if only marginally so. Whatever magic was boosting his speed didn't make him much stronger though, and he opted to deflect her blows, rather than pitting strength against strength. He was also favouring his right arm, where she had managed to land a glancing blow. Still, she didn't get the feeling she was winning. "You are one of the fakes!" she accused him, trying to bolster her confidence.

"My skill alone will suffice for defeating you," Amadeus replied between fast, shallow breaths. "Though it admittedly doesn't grant me enough leeway to go easy on you."

As if to drive his point home, his sword darted at an already damaged section of the armour covering Cathy's abdomen, parting the segmented metal with a screech.

She avoided sudden disembowelment by twisting away from the

blade at the last moment, but not before its tip had tasted her blood.

Capitalising on her awkward posture, the Avatar followed up with a cut at her wrist. It failed to penetrate - narrowly - but still rattled her limb inside the gauntlet.

"If it reassures you," he continued, "my healing skills are also sufficient to prevent you from bleeding out once I'm done with you. There was definitely a smug expression on his face. The bastard didn't even take her seriously enough to close his visor.

Under her own skull-themed helmet, Cathy scowled. His damned adamantine-edged sword - she hurriedly moved her face out of its path - would make her die a death of a thousand cuts. How much damage could her armour take before it stopped working, anyway? It was long past time she tried something new.

She drew power from her connection to Mercury's magic, gathering it to her hands. The mystical energy tingled and popped under her skin, and her fingers felt as cold as if she had dipped them into liquid ice. Strangely enough, it wasn't an unpleasant sensation. Now, timing was everything. His sword approached again, almost too fast to see. She barely managed to brush it aside. Too quick. She needed to await a solid parry like - now!

Blue light erupted from her hands as she released the prepared energy. Not a real spell, she just didn't have the time to go through the motions for Mercury's technique. Instead, she tossed the gathered magic out in the right general direction as an uncontrolled spray.

Blue motes sprayed from her hands as if she had tossed a bucket of glowing water at Amadeus, and his eyes widened a fraction. He jumped back instantly, but there was no way he could get away from the expanding blast in time. While moving, he traced a finger along the back of his blade, imbuing it with a faint glow. His enchanted sword hacked through the incoming spray, sucking it towards the weapon in a swirling spiral.

Upon impact, Mercury's magic did what came naturally, and encased the blade in a torso-sized chunk of ice.

Cathy doubted that the Avatar had been going for that result. Neither had she, but it was a still a nice consolation prize. Lacking superhuman strength, he wasn't going to swing that kind of weight around.

He knew that too and let go off the handle without hesitation.

Cathy didn't hesitate either. She lunged, war hammer raised high, and then she was suddenly flying backwards, her vision swimming from a bright flash. A heartbeat later, pain flared up in her back as she slammed into the ground, the impact driving the breath from her lungs. Ow. The world spun around her as she rolled to a stop.

She hurriedly glanced back at the Avatar. He stood within a circle of bare rock, the stone scoured clean of soil and mud. The closest onlookers were wearing the muck as a thin coating, and her goblins and orc whimpered as they rubbed their eyes. The dwarfs seemed unaffected, even if they weren't any less dirty than Cathy's warriors.

She could have kicked herself. Good job forgetting he could fall back on plain old regular light magic even without his fancy special Avatar powers. It wasn't as if he hadn't already showed that by dispersing the mist. Groaning, she pushed herself up into a crouch, keeping her eyes on Amadeus.

Her opponent held out one hand in an imperious gesture, palm facing the sky. Immediately, one of the nearby dwarven soldiers threw him her own pickaxe, which he caught with practised ease. Its edge burst into silver flame as he gave it a testing swing.

Well, crap. Here he came, swooping down on her like a bird of prey made from gleaming silver and fluttering cloth.

Cathy flung herself aside, and the flaming axe bit into the ground instead. Flying pieces of steaming earth pinged off her armour as she swiped at his legs, forcing him to retreat instead of attacking again before she could finish rising to her feet. He darted past her on her left, too fast for her to parry the burning blade completely. She clenched her teeth in pain as it struck her upper arm, the weapon's heat searing her skin through her armour.

Still turning toward him, she used her rotation for a vicious kick - only for his elbow to slam down on her knee. No effect due to her armour, but she wobbled precariously - enough for him to slip past her defences again and slash at her thigh. Ow! This wasn't - her eyes closed reflexively in response to a nearby flash, and she felt the sting of a blow deflecting off her armour. Back-pedalling, she flailed her weapon wildly to gain some room, squinting as she observed her opponent carefully.

This time, she spotted the Avatar's free hand draw an arcane gesture in the air before another flash robbed her of her vision for an instant - and the sudden pain in her sword arm told her that it had been enough for him to slip past her defence again. Another flash, another vulnerable moment, more pain. Cathy found herself giving ground rapidly as Amadeus performed his sequence with precision. Block, flash, blink, pain. Block, flash, blink, pain.

Screw this! She was in neither mood nor shape to deal with this annoying but effective trickery for much longer.

Before the next flash, she made her longest leap yet - away from him and into the unsuspecting crowd. As she sailed through the air, an orb of light flew at her from the Avatar's position, evaporating the raindrops it encountered in its path. Crap, she couldn't dodge in the air! "Shabon Spray Freezing!" She recited hastily, glad once again that Mercury now had enough power to fuel the spell quickly. A focused stream of bubbles shoot from her hands an met the incoming projectile. Both exploded into a shower of hailstones, which Cathy ignored it in favour of preparing her landing.

The baffled dwarf she picked as her target barely had time to scream in surprise before she knocked him to the ground and yanked off his warding chain. It was time one of those annoying things worked in her favour for once. Trophy in hand, she returned her attention to Amadeus.

He wasn't hard to find, as nobody on either side of the battle who was currently between them wanted to remain there. As the troops scrambled to vacate the area, she saw that he hadn't been idle while she was mugging the dwarf. His panting had stopped, vanished along with other signs of exertion, and even the sweat on his face

was gone.

Now that was completely unfair! Here she was, bleeding, exhausted, and bruised pretty much everywhere, and he looked just as fresh as he'd started out. She wrapped the stolen chain around her wrist with a flick of her hand. At least he wouldn't be able to use abbot-like magical power against her from now on, and he hadn't recovered his sword either. The adamantine-edged weapon was still stuck in an ice block a good distance away. That meant her opponent was weakened to being no worse than Marda in a more suitable body.

She hadn't actually beaten Marda in a fair fight ever.

On the other hand, she had never fought the troll while wearing powered armour either. Cheered by that comforting thought, she launched herself back into combat.

As the clanging of their blades rang over the battlefield once more, she found herself more evenly matched with her opponent now. Still, it was ridiculous that she wasn't getting any telling blows through his defences. He might be the best fighter in the world while she probably didn't even rank among the top thousand, but she was stronger and faster than him! Hell, they were trading blows so quickly that she had trouble reacting to them, even with the all-around boosts that Mercury's enchantments provided. How was he doing it?

Experience. Had to be. He could read her body's movements and pick an appropriate response even before she struck. Could she exploit that, do something unexpected and trick him that way?

She thought of goblins. When you were looking for surprising combat moves, you rarely had to look further than the closest goblin. Mainly because they couldn't tell that they weren't supposed to do the damn stupid thing they were about to try next. This didn't actually make them more dangerous.

Okay, scratch that plan. The Avatar would see through any feint she tried anyway. Maybe she should just ask for help from Mercury? Cathy didn't like that option too much either. Giving up would feel like betraying the trust the young empress had put into her. Not that

Mercury would hold it against her, but she wouldn't forgive herself for simply giving up on such an important task. Besides, the teenager was busy rescuing people and would probably blame herself for any deaths that happened while she was distracted.

So, the hard way, then. She'd just have to push herself to the limits and try to wear him down before she passed out from her injuries. Forgoing some defence, she struck as fast and as hard as she could.

The Avatar gave ground, pushed back by the additional force behind her blows. He reacted to her change in tactics by shifting his grip on his pickaxe, turning it so that the pick-shaped part faced her.

Cathy swallowed. Where his axe blade had trouble actually penetrating armour, the solid metal spike of his weapon would go right through if she gave him the opportunity to land a square hit. He had to be counting on her aggressive approach providing him with an opening. Should she reconsider? Jered would disapprove so much of her putting her health on the line like this. She was seriously tempted to let up, but no. She wasn't going to last much longer anyway, and if he pierced her armour, his weapon would be stuck long enough for her to do something. She'd just have to bear the pain and-

The Avatar's silver-wreathed pickaxe broke under the force of her latest blow, catching both of the combatants off-guard.

Amadeus recovered faster from the surprise and stepped into her guard. When had he grabbed her arm? A leg hooked behind her own, and she found herself losing her balance.

No! Cathy yanked the arm he was holding onto upwards, lifting him off the ground. Robbed off leverage, he could no longer complete his throw. She was still toppling forwards though.

Pulling the Avatar even closer, she turned her fall into a vicious head-butt directed at his face. That should teach him to close his visor!

Her helmet collided with his chin and rang like a gong. A very faint

flash of light covered his face as it filled her vision, and it felt as if she had just slammed her head into a brick wall. Damn it! She actually bounced back enough to arrest her momentum.

Through the pain-induced haze before her eyes, she saw the Avatar's face rock away from her own as if in slow motion. His gaze met hers, and one of his eyes closed and re-opened as he toppled backwards. His armour rattled loudly as he landed on his back, unmoving.

What?

Cathy blinked dumbly at the still body before her, only vaguely aware that the battlefield was falling quiet around her.

Slowly, a cheer rose from monstrous throats, swelling as more and more of her troops noticed her standing victoriously over her opponent.

"The Avatar has fallen!" shouted a voice shrill with disbelieving terror.

"Save him! Rescue the Avatar!" another nearby dwarf cried out.

Cathy's eyes widened as every nearby dwarf turned towards her and charged with suicidal determination. Legs feeling like molten lead, she catapulted herself into the air and backward, escaping from the converging circle of fanatical soldiers by jumping over it.

Panting, she watched one dwarf kneel down at the Avatar's side while the others shielded him with their bodies, forming a weapon-bristling perimeter around him.

She started to wonder whether or not her opponents were aware that this Avatar was an imposter - she had been too busy previously to think about that - when the kneeling dwarf pulled something from Amadeus' belt.

There was a flicker of white, and a transparent oval rose into the air, waving mildly in the breeze.

During the moment it took Cathy's tired mind to catch up, she

wondered why the Avatar would keep a ghost in his bag. She cursed when she finally identified the phenomenon as a hero gate. Already, someone was pulling the Avatar through, his legs and feet being last to disappear. His guardians jumped in after him, prompting a general rush towards the newly-provided escape route.

She raised her hand, signalling her troops to not interfere now that she finally had the dwarfs running. She glanced over at the rest of the enemy troops behind the magnetic barrier.

They hadn't been idle while she was fighting, using thrown ropes and sticks to drag their stuck comrades back to safely. Their movements lacked their initial zeal and determination, though, and they were quieter too.

Cathy returned her attention to the hero gate, which looked dimmer now that most of the dwarfs on this side of the barrier had fled into it. Mercury would not be happy about the gate's presence. On the other hand, she would have been even unhappier if the thing had been carried deep into her dungeon, so Cathy was willing to count this as a qualified success.

Somewhere behind the enemy lines sounded a signal horn. It's noise was repeated by several others further away. Slowly, the warriors behind the barrier started to pull back, gather their wounded, and walk back toward the west.

Cathy almost collapsed to her knees in relief. She had won. The dwarfs were, if not running, then at least retreating. Dimly, she heard the signal being repeated somewhere deep under her feet, too.

"Cathy?" Mercury's mental voice sounded about as exhausted as the blonde felt, but also elated. *"The dwarfs are pulling back! Did you manage to convince the Avatar?"*

"Uh, about that..."

Last edited: Jul 13, 2016

Battle Aftermath (DARK)

Originally on 2014-09-12T20:37:00

A warlock on the first floor of Ami's command centre turned away from the scrying mirrors that lined the wall behind him. The glowing rectangles cast his face in shadows, hiding his expression. He approached the railing, bowed in her direction, and reported in a confident voice "We have not spotted any more dwarfs approaching the dungeon, your Majesty."

Ami's rigid posture relaxed as some tenseness left her muscles. She dared hardly believe that the battle was finally over. "Acknowledged. Thank you, Halastor." Now she only needed to figure out if this was more than a momentary reprieve. She swivelled her command chair a little to the left, and the crystal ball set in a pedestal before her flared to life.

Within the orb, images of the terrain surrounding the mountain flashed past in rapid succession. She found that the half of the enemy army that hadn't joined the attack had not been idle during the fight. In the dawn's light, she observed a few crude walls in strategic locations, cobbled together from roughly-worked rock. Behind them, workers were crawling all over the foundations of sturdy watchtowers.

She almost smiled at the sight. Fortifications indicated that the dwarfs were preparing for a siege, which meant they weren't about to hit her with a second attack wave of well-rested soldiers. Given the progress they'd made so far, they must have started construction simultaneously with their attack.

She checked, but didn't find any of her claimed territory remaining behind enemy lines, which gave her new insight into the enemy's strategy. She didn't doubt that the dwarfs would have been ecstatic if they had defeated her at once, but in hindsight, they had been going for containment. By cutting her dungeon down to a manageable size around its core, they reduced the length of the

perimeter they needed to encircle her claim and prevent it from expanding.

Her mood sank a little when she pondered that the dwarfs would also be waiting for sufficient reinforcements to assault her dungeon successfully. A problem in the long run, but one she would be able to prepare for. The longer the wait, the more her gem production would shift the advantage in her favour. More importantly, in the short term it meant that she had time to recover from the attack.

She stood, drawing attention to herself, and faced her employees on the floors above. "Good work, everyone," she said, a tired smile on her face. "We have won this battle."

On the uppermost floor, the goblins started cheering and dancing on their chairs. "We the best! We the best!"

Ami's gaze darted towards them, her eyebrows lowering into a frown. Right now, she didn't have time for goblin antics. There was the aftermath of the battle to deal with. "Quiet!" she snapped, raising her voice over the noise.

The small creatures froze in surprise, except for the one who lost his balance and fell off his chair.

"I'll keep this short since everyone is tired," Ami continued. Addressing one warlock in particular, she said "Halastor, organise a small crew of warlocks who will continue keeping an eye on the dwarfs. I want to be informed the moment they try something."

"It shall be done, your Majesty."

"Everyone else can go and get some well-deserved rest. Dismissed," she finished, a proclamation that was received with smiles and approving mumbling all around. She stifled a yawn, feeling dead tired too because she had worked furiously all night.

Unfortunately, she didn't have time to rest yet. She had a dungeon to patch up and, more importantly, to make sure nobody else died today. Too many people had already been hurt for no good reason.

First, she closed her eyes and focused her full attention on sensing

her dungeon and the imps sprinting through its darkened halls. The echoing patter of their footsteps froze for an instant as they felt her gaze on them and processed their new priorities. A moment later, they dropped their picks and rushed off to get stretchers to recover the wounded.

Speaking of the wounded, she needed to bring Cathy to the healers. The blonde had gone back into battle already injured, and her confrontation with the Avatar couldn't have done her any favours. The instant Ami started worrying about the swordswoman, her Keeper vision zoomed in on her location.

On the muddy, rain-soaked surface, the air vibrated with the sound of orc and troll voices as they chanted Cathy's name. The four largest of the creatures were carrying her on their shoulders, still in her bloodstained armour. A few goblins followed the odd procession, carrying a chunk of ice with a fancy-looking sword stuck inside.

Cathy was waving at the crowd and had taken of her helmet, letting her hair flow free. To Ami, the proud grin on the blonde's bruised face looked quite strained whenever her carriers jostled her.

"Cathy, I'm going to send you to the infirmary" she informed the blonde, not giving her any time to protest as she transported her out of her battle-damaged armour.

"Wha-" Cathy suddenly found herself lying on a soft cot.

Ami paled at the sight of the woman's blood-encrusted and tattered undersuit. There were gashes and rips everywhere, some of them with charred edges. She had fought like that?

Cathy prodded at the wet garment and blinked when her finger failed to encounter metal. *"Oh. Thanks. The armour would have been really fun to take off,"* the blonde messaged with a grimace. *"I guess you want the details about the Avatar? He-"*

"Later," Ami interrupted gently. Cathy had already done more for her today than could be reasonably expected. *"Please, just rest for now."*

"Not complaining," the swordswoman agreed and let her head sink onto a pillow.

Ami wished she could ease the blonde's suffering right now, but there were other people who needed help more urgently. Through Cathy's minion bond, she could feel that the exhausted warrior's life signs were stable, even if she wasn't in any fighting shape. One of the healers would eventually get around to treating her wounds.

Reacting to Ami's current interest in her healers, her Keeper sight showed her Snyder. The young acolyte was hurrying from bed to bed and touching his monstrous patients, a soft glow surrounding his hands. Behind him followed a warlock and several bandage-carrying veteran soldiers to provide more mundane first aid in his wake. Not far away behind a curtain, Monteraine was treating the more grievously injured underlings. Currently, the black-haired sorceress had her hands buried wrist-deep in the guts of a pink-skinned troll.

Ami quickly averted her gaze from the operating table, feeling queasy.

Locating the last of the trained magical healers in her dungeon required a conscious effort of will. Being neither a minion nor prisoner, Abbot Durval lacked any connection to the dungeon heart that would have let Ami find him at once. Instead, she knew to look for him a floor below, where the dwarfs were treated separately from her own troops for their own safety.

The abbot looked his age as he reached for the dwarven patient before him, his shaking left hand resting heavily on his staff. Even with a few warlocks assigned to assist him, he looked as if he was about to collapse from exhaustion. Tiger was at his side in her human disguise.

Ami was surprised at her sister's presence, but that was something she would investigate when she didn't need to deal with a number of life signs ebbing away throughout her dungeon.

Immediately, a troll pinned to the ground by a spear through his stomach appeared in her mind's eye. Elsewhere, a dwarf with a

shattered helmet rested on a heap of rubble, strands of brown hair matted with dark blood. In yet another corridor, one dwarf on the ground was coughing up blood while a second sat next to him, threatening the gawking monsters around them with his pickaxe. The dungeon heart showed Ami another motionless and dying dwarf, but she couldn't tell at at a glance what was wrong with him. Finally, a group of orcs was staring down at one of their own lying in a pool of blood on the ground, arguing about whether or not moving him would make the bleeding worse.

Ami's heart skipped a beat as she realised she didn't have the means to save all of them in time, and she felt as if someone had doused her with ice water. How was she supposed to decide who got to live or die?

She tried to imagine her mother, a real doctor, in a situation like this. Had she ever had to make such a choice? If so, she had never told Ami about it. Still, the memory of her mother's calm competence helped Ami to snap out of her paralysing indecision. Mother would try to help those who had the best chance at surviving.

Without hesitation, Ami snatched Snyder from the infirmary and dropped him down next to the bleeding orc, not wasting time with an explanation. The nature of the injury - a large axe stuck in the pink-skinned soldier's right thigh - would be as blindingly obvious as its solution was straightforward. Even with the acolyte's comparatively weak healing spells, he should be able to prevent the patient from bleeding out.

Next, she was forced to chose whom she would help personally. The dwarf with the head wound was out of luck, as she didn't think she would be able to put damaged parts of the brain back together properly with her necromancy-based healing spell. Likewise, the dwarf whom she hadn't been able to diagnose moved to the back of the queue, as she would have to spend time figuring out what was wrong with him first.

That left her with the impaled troll and the blood-coughing dwarf, and suddenly, her method of prioritising was no longer applicable. Stabilising either of them would be roughly the same difficulty, so she needed another criteria.

Ami felt torn. On one side, the troll was a soldier in her army, and the dwarf was an opponent. On the other, her underling was a mercenary who had signed up for this, while the dwarf looked like a militiaman with neither the equipment nor the build of a professional soldier. She didn't want to abandon someone who had fought loyally for her, but she also didn't want to let someone die who had been forced into this situation. Most of all, she didn't want to make this decision, but then they would both die. Wringing her hands, she searched for a quick reason to choose one over the other.

Save the soldier so he could fight for her again, or save the dwarf so his death wouldn't give the others more motivation to continue fighting her? Pragmatism wasn't helping, either.

Her mind flashed back to the less injured dwarf who was still protecting his dying companion. Without really wanting to, she imagined herself in his place, trying to defend a dying Usagi, only to later learn that she had been keeping away the medics who could have saved her friend.

With a small strangled noise from the back of her throat, she disappeared, her decision made.

Her troops started when she appeared in a flash of blue behind the injured duo, close enough that the snowflakes from her teleportation swirled around the two dwarves.

"Empress?"

"Your Majesty!"

With a gasp, the dwarf sitting next to his bleeding comrade tried to turn towards the threat behind him.

Ami tapped the back of his neck with an energy-draining touch, sending him off into unconsciousness. While he keeled over quietly, she knelt down next to her patient, touched his face and drew upon her healing spells. She could have tried healing him remotely, but the physical contact helped her sense the composition of his body, greatly improving how accurately she could manipulate the flesh.

The magic mapping out his body immediately confirmed that his lung was damaged, punctured by sharp splinters from a broken rip, and one wing had collapsed.

First, the internal bleeding needed to stop. Ami directed her magic to seal ruptured blood vessels, focusing less on restoring function and more on getting the patient stable enough for transport to the infirmary. She immobilised the broken ribs so they wouldn't move and cause more damage. Their splinters were harder to neutralise. Frowning, she borrowed some cartilage to pad their sharp parts. Someone would need to remove them properly later, but right now, she had to concentrate on keeping the patient alive.

At the edge of her perception, she noticed her soldiers had lowered their weapons and given her some space. The distance didn't prevent them from watching curiously, or from chatting among themselves with low voices. A few of the goblins were whispering.

Ami listened in closer - anything to distract her from the horrible gurgling noise the dwarf made as she drained bloody liquid from his lungs - and had no trouble hearing the words spoken on her own territory.

"Why she healing stupid hairbag? Should be healing me instead!" a goblin who was favouring his left leg whispered to another.

"Is for evil," the second one replied.

"Huh?"

"Not caring about loyal minions is evil. She Keeper. Is obvious."

The first goblin grimaced. "Me no like. That wrong kind of evil! She-"

A female troll rapped both of them on their helmets with her knuckles. "She can hear you, idiots," she said in a sing-song voice.

The goblins gulped and craned their heads to peer closer at their empress. "Why you say that? She not doing anything!"

"Because she wasn't scowling before you started talking," the troll pointed out with unconcealed glee.

Ami realised that the warrior was right and relaxed her facial expression. It had hurt to hear her difficult decision questioned like that only moments after she had taken it. Irritated, she shifted her head a little and briefly glanced in the direction of the green pair from the corner of her eyes.

"Eeep!" the first goblin paled and dived into hiding behind an orc's shield.

The other grabbed him and pulled him back out in the open. "Me very sorry, your Majestic Empress Majesty!" he shouted loudly. "Not sure what wrong, but it all his fault!"

With a drawn-out breath, Ami stood up. A moment of concentration, and her stabilised patient disappeared, only to reappear over an empty bed in the infirmary's emergency wing. Ami lowered him gently onto the soft surface before she turned towards her gawking troops. She gestured at the remaining unconscious dwarf at her feet. "Get him to the infirmary," she snapped, not waiting for an answer before she teleported again. She had to hurry and save as many of the other mortally wounded people as she could!

The sickening smell of ruptured bowels struck her when she arrived next to the impaled troll. The wooden spear haft protruding from his stomach like a macabre flag pole stood completely motionless, not even a tiny quiver hinting at life remaining within the body. Ami had arrived just in time to feel his minion bond dissolve as death claimed him.

She balled her hands into fists, her fingernails digging into her palms. "Darn it!" She had been too slow, too late.

She lowered her head. Did she make the wrong choice by healing the dwarf first? Could she have saved them both if she had stabilised the orc first instead? Should she have taken more of a risk instead of wasting time making sure her patient was stable?

No. Guilt was not productive. Ami clenched her teeth in determination. Those were questions for later. Right now, she needed to focus on more important tasks. How could she save the two remaining wounded?

She could theoretically use her necromancy to glue damaged brain tissues back together, but she had very little control over how the different cells would connect with each other. The result was bound to end up messy and unsatisfactory for everyone involved. Better to leave that to one of the Light magic healers, preferably the Abbot. No, he was busy healing, and she couldn't move him with Keeper transport anyway. Was Snyder done with his patient?

Yes. Well, not really, as the redhead was still kneeling next to his patient, a soft glow from his hands sinking into the axe-free and scabbed-over wound. Nevertheless, the dungeon heart informed her that the orc's condition was no longer deteriorating.

That should suffice. It had to. Ami yanked Snyder through space and dropped him down next to dwarf with the head wound, prompting a surprised sputter from the Acolyte. *"Sorry, just get him stable,"* she sent a telepathic message before she transported herself to the last dwarf.

He was still conscious and made a horrified croaking noise as she appeared before him. In his polished helmet, an ember-eyed reflection with a tattered cloak mirrored Ami's movements as she reached for him. With barely enough strength to lift his hand, the frightened dwarf tried to fend her off.

Ami closed her fingers around his limb and held it firmly, using the contact to initiate her healing spell.

Inner bleeding from blunt impacts, the magic told her at once. Well within her ability to heal, though his heart racing from terror was accelerating the blood loss.

"Don't be afraid, I'm here to help," she comforted the shaking dwarf in a soft voice, which didn't stop him from trying to pull his hand away from hers. Undeterred, she started patching up leaky blood vessels, a comparatively simple task. With a few minutes of concentrated work, she stopped the bleeding.

Her Keeper senses confirmed that the prisoner was no longer dying, and so was nobody else in the dungeon right now. Snyder's two patients remained alive, if very weak.

Ami inhaled deeply before she contacted the acolyte. *"Great work, Snyder. Thank you so much!"*

"I'm glad I could help," the redhead sent back, the tiredness in his voice noticeable even through the distortions from the communication spell. *"Take care to handle the dwarf's head like you would a fragile eggshell when you transport him."*

"I'll be careful," Ami promised. *"I'm sorry for yanking you from place to place so abruptly, but there was no time to lose."*

"No need to apologise, I saw the condition of the wounded. Now, could you give me a lift back to the infirmary, please?"

"Of course." Ami did as he requested and moved on to make transport arrangements for the rest of the wounded. After verifying that there was nothing else requiring her immediate attention, she sat down where she stood and closed her eyes, grateful to finally get a break.

With no emergency to occupy her thoughts, they drifted back to the troll who had died due to her prioritisation.

She sighed, wondering again if she had overlooked a better solution. In any case, he was dead and beyond her help. The only thing she could do for him now was moving the cooling body to the morgue personally, rather than letting the imps do it. It was only a symbolic gesture, but she felt that she owed him that much. With her Keeper hand, she began the grisly task of pulling the spear from the corpse's entrails while she switched her Keeper view to the morgue.

Wait, there were not supposed to be goblins inside the ice-filled room. At least not living ones.

Ami teleported into the large chamber, her breath condensing immediately in the cold air. She had no trouble spotting three green figures moving between the hills of glittering ice inside the room.

Two haggard-looking goblins were clinging to the large, empty barrel they were carrying, fighting to keep their balance on the slippery

floor. The third and fattest of the trio had a large cleaver strapped to her belt and was leaning over a dwarf corpse lying on an ice slab, pinching its arms.

"Brugli! What are you doing here?" Ami confronted the leader of the group, getting goosebumps not just from the chill.

The goblin cook turned slowly towards Ami, her mouth widening into a pleased grin. "Empress! Brugli selecting best meat for victory feast! Will be great! Not just boring chicken and eggs!"

Ami's stomach lurched at having her sickening suspicion confirmed. "No, absolutely not! You are completely forbidden from cooking anything you could have held a conversation with!" she shouted, horrified. Cannibalism aside, she didn't even want to speculate about what the dwarfs would think if she let her minions desecrate their dead. What was she supposed to do about their bodies, anyway? Were there special burial rites she would have to follow in order to avoid giving offence?

Brugli blinked and shrugged, making the rolls of fat around her neck quiver. "If you say so. Raw is fine too-"

"No, it's really not!" Ami narrowed her eyes at the goblin, unsure whether she was being mocked or if goblin culture was really that different. "You - actually, anyone - is forbidden from taking anything from this place," she clarified in a tone that left no room for argument.

"But saw your sister taking pieces," Brugli protested, her tone petulant.

Ami gaped. Tiger? But she couldn't- wouldn't want to- Oh. She relaxed as she made the mental connection between Tiger, the infirmary, and body parts. Transplants. She shook her head. "Just get out," she told the goblins and pointed at the door.

The goblins left, Brugli waddling behind her slimmer companions. Their footsteps faded away, leaving Ami alone in the silent hall filled with fresh corpses.

She briefly glanced at the bodies on the frozen slabs and lowered her gaze, unwilling to meet their unmoving, accusing eyes. All of those soldiers, dead because of her. She hadn't wanted any of this. Would it have been better if she had surrendered to the Light gods and avoided all of this fighting?

She felt something wet at the corners of her eyes and wiped it away. What would her friends and her mother think of her when they learned that she hadn't managed to prevent this? She was almost glad it was early in the morning and she didn't have to face them until they got out of school or back from work.

Intellectually, she knew that the fatality rate among the dwarfs had been amazingly low, less than thirty dead when they had attacked with fifty times that number. She still felt she had failed, even though she had proof that things would have been much worse if she hadn't instructed her troops to fight non-lethally. No, especially because she had proof of that. The dwarfs hadn't been pulling their blows, and the dead trolls, orcs, and goblins in the room outnumbered them by a factor of four - a fact that only made Ami feel worse.

She reminded herself that the battle had still been a solid victory in her favour. She had around a quarter of the attacking force locked up in her prisons, while the dead in this room were most of her side's casualties. She paused. That was kind of concerning in itself, now that she thought about it. There should have been more wounded than dead. A skewed ratio like that meant that her opponents had outright killed everyone they could get their hands on.

Some of her sympathy for the dwarfs waned. Yes, she could understand that they felt afraid for their homes and loved ones, but that was no justification for wholesale slaughter.

What should she do with this knowledge, though? Did she need to punish those among her prisoners who were guilty, and if so, how? She didn't know the local laws pertaining to war crimes - if they even existed. In any case, she doubted that the Light condoned the killing of defeated enemies. On the other hand, the Avatar, or at least a good copy, had fought on the side of the dwarfs. Had he been involved in the massacre too, or had it happened away from his

eyes? She hesitated and decided that she lacked sufficient information to commit to a course of action.

She needed to ask Cathy about the Avatar and to talk to Snyder about Light-approved conduct in battle. The help of a lawyer could also be useful, so she should question Tiger about how her mission to hire one went - among other things. Actually, it would probably best if she called everyone important together for a proper debriefing.

Last edited: Sep 9, 2016

Informal Debriefing

Originally on 2014-10-11T02:25:00

When Ami thought of a lair, she did not normally imagine a comfortable living room. Nevertheless, that was exactly what the chamber had turned into when she had manipulated it into a comfortable meeting place for the debriefing. Sure, the aquamarine-coloured upholstery ended in some jagged, frost-patterned ornamentations, and some of the seats had proportions not entirely suitable for human occupants, but in general, the place looked surprisingly cosy and refined.

The crude pillar of rock that suddenly appeared on the carpet therefore looked out-of-place in this environment. With a soft rumbling noise, it grew to the size of a man before its surface cracked and shattered, leaving a carrot-coloured youma standing amidst the fading debris from her teleportation effect. Grey powder stuck briefly to the black fabric of Tiger's leotard-like outfit as she stepped out of the short-lived dust cloud.

Ami self-consciously adjusted the collar of her recently re-conjured cloak. The gashes Tiger had cut into her outfit to show off her stripes rendered it a little more daring than the blue-haired teenager was comfortable with.

Tiger looked around curiously until she spotted Ami sitting on the L-shaped couch in the corner and froze when she noticed the other occupant of the room. "What's up with Lizard Girl?" she blurted out, her gaze focused on Ami's right hand.

The limb rested on the bald head of Lishika, who was also lying on the couch, covered by a blanket and motionless except for one of her fin-shaped ears twitching occasionally.

Ami glanced over at the unconscious youma. "She overextended herself when powering the electromagnets. I'm maintaining a low-powered healing spell so she can absorb its mana."

"Really?" Tiger's expression grew speculative. "And here I was hoping it had something to do with how you somehow convinced your corruption to forego its more perverted expressions. Suspicious." She grinned and demonstratively studied the pieces of furniture one by one, as if expecting the various comfortable armchairs and stools to hide scenes of debauchery and deviance.

Ami felt her cheeks heat up, and she reluctantly pointed her index finger up at the thick cloud of Shabon Spray fog that concealed the ceiling. "Up there. I didn't put that mist there only to make scrying on us difficult," she admitted.

Tiger faced the ceiling. "I'm almost curious enough to fly up and have a look," she said. Instead, she approached Ami and plopped down next to her on the couch, making the cushions bounce. "So, what's up?"

"I was happy to see you helping out in the infirmary," Ami said, trying to keep the trickle of magic going to Lishika steady. "Did Abbot Durval tell you what to do?"

"Nah, I know how to heal. I know the same healing spells you do," Tiger said, pointing at her head. "Admittedly, I'm not as good at using them, since I don't have a really awesome dungeon heart doing all the hard parts for me." With a grin, she added in a teasing voice. "You dirty little cheater, you."

"Um." Ami didn't really know how to handle mild sisterly ribbing and settled on not reacting at all. "Well, I think it's really nice that you are helping people," she said. "I didn't know you were interested in healing."

Tiger rubbed the back of her head. "Ah, well, I thought Mum might like it."

Ami smiled. "I'm sure she'll be proud of you! I'm proud of you too. Did you study up on surgery by yourself? The transplants idea-"

Tiger flinched, her face taking on a greenish tint. "Ugh, don't remind me." She pulled her legs up and encircled them with her arms. "That was pretty much Monteraine going 'Hey you, teleporter! Fetch me

some spare parts!' and handing me a scalpel and a list. If I ever have to cut and carve around in gross, wobbly, sticky cadavers again... urk." She shuddered and pressed her eyes shut.

Ami blinked "Oh." With her recently gained healing experience, she could all too easily imagine how queasy something like that would have made her. If Tiger felt the same as her, which wasn't much of a stretch since Tiger was partly her, then she needed some comfort. Tentatively, Ami reached with her left arm around her sister and patted her on her shoulder.

Tiger's muscles tensed under Ami's touch, and she froze in surprise. A moment later, she uncoiled and moved quick like a snake.

Ami suddenly found herself yanked into a strong hug, with her sister holding onto her for dear life. Surprised, she hesitated for an instant before reciprocating and putting her arms around the other girl. Not the kind of reaction she had been expecting, but, well, it felt nice and seemed to make Tiger feel better.

After a while of silence, Tiger started shifting and sheepishly muttered into Ami's shoulder. "She's not watching this, is she?" Her eyes were peering into Lishika's direction.

Ami shook her head. "She's unconscious."

Despite that reassurance, Tiger let go and sat up straighter, putting one leg over the other as she leaned back. "Small mercies," she commented. "Oh well, you have to take the good with the bad. "At least the dwarfs were somewhat amusing."

"What?" Now *that* was a little alarming. Ami couldn't think of anything funny about injured people.

"Well, one moment they were all-" Tiger scowled exaggeratedly and made her voice deeper "- away with your foul necromancy, demon slattern!" In her normal voice, she continued "And then someone would shout at them for being rude to the Dark Princess," she helpfully pointed her thumb at her chest, "and then they'd completely change their attitude." In her dwarf voice, she whined "No, please, your Highness, couldn't you reconsider?"

"Really? That seems odd, given their stubbornness so far." Ami made a mental note of it for later. Perhaps she could get better results if she left the negotiations to Tiger? Speaking of negotiations, that reminded her of the youma's previous mission. "So what did the lawyer say about being able to help us?"

"Oh, that slimy bastard said he was willing to consult with colleagues and compile a list of the various laws governing interaction between ruling entities for us - for a substantially higher fee than normal, of course." Tiger didn't sound too impressed. "He also admitted that dwarven law wasn't exactly his area of expertise."

"Maybe we could get some of the dwarf prisoners to help with that instead?" Ami said, wondering what it would take to get them to cooperate. Distorted information could be worse than useless. "It's a start, at least."

"Oh, I did learn something else, too. The king of Nimbadnur has called on Baron Leopold's assistance to defend his country against you. Apparently, they are allies or something."

"The dwarfs are taking me that seriously already?" Ami wasn't too concerned about Leopold showing up. He was a powerful fighter, but no match for Jadeite, Rabixtrel, or even Cathy. She found it more alarming that the dwarfs felt so threatened by her that they were willing to call upon alliances already.

"Apparently. Hey, it sounds as if the others are about to show up."

Outside in the corridor, voices and footsteps approached. A moment later, someone knocked on the door.

"Come in!" Ami said and made the door swing open.

A palanquin stopped in front of the door, and the four trolls carrying it lowered it so its occupant could get off. Cathy sat up with a motion that was surprisingly smooth for someone wrapped in enough bandages that only a few sections of skin remained exposed. She came in and pulled the door shut behind herself, blocking the view of the curious underlings."Empress," she greeted.

Ami's eyes widened a little as she took in the blonde's appearance. Why wasn't she back to full health? "Cathy, are you still hurt? Do I need to heal you?"

Cathy held up one hand and backed away in mock fright. "Don't you dare! As long as I have my bruises, my bandages are safe from the corruption!"

"But-"

"Don't worry, I'm mostly joking. I simply wanted the healers to conserve their strength for serious injuries." She looked down at herself. "Though I'm not complaining about being able to wear something without parts flaking off."

"I'm not a fan of the mummy chic," Tiger commented.

Cathy glanced over at her and stopped when she spotted Lishika next to Ami. She raised an eyebrow.

"Lishika powered the electromagnets until she fell unconscious," Ami explained. "I'm restoring her reserves with my healing spell. You can talk freely, I'll notify you if she wakes up."

"I'll make sure to thank her later." Cathy selected the softest-looking armchair opposite from Ami and let herself drop into it. "Speaking of exhaustion, Snyder is excusing himself from this meeting. He wouldn't be able to contribute anything worthwhile to the debriefing anyway."

Ami did have questions for him, but they had answers she would need to ponder in peace anyway. "That's all right. But, um, do you know if the Avatar approved of what the dwarfs were doing? Killing everyone, I mean."

Cathy shrugged. "He didn't talk all that much before he attacked me." She paused. "Wait. He told me that I was too dangerous for him to hold back, so he'd have to heal me enough that I wouldn't die after he defeated me. I guess that means he wasn't entirely on board with plan 'exterminate'."

Ami perked up. "So the Light doesn't approve of that kind of

behaviour?"

"You aren't supposed to hurt the helpless, no," the blonde confirmed. "I get the feeling he and the dwarfs don't see eye to eye-"

"Because they are too short?" Tiger interjected, earning herself a reproachful look from both Ami and the swordswoman.

"As I was saying," Cathy continued, "he broke their morale by throwing the fight and got them to prematurely deploy their hero gate by not telling them he was a fake. So there."

"Are you sure about all of that?" Ami asked. Faking a defeat wouldn't serve any purpose if he wanted the dwarfs to win. If he wanted them to break off their attack, however, it would work very well.

"No, it's perfectly normal to fall unconscious after being head-butted in the invisible shield protecting your face," the swordswoman muttered. She poked at the bandage around her forehead and grimaced a little. "So yeah, I'm pretty sure he was faking it."

"And him not being the real one?"

"Well, that's harder to say. He sounded and acted and fought like the real one, but didn't have the power to back it up. I'm pretty confident I could have beaten him eventually if I had started the battle uninjured."

"Let's hope we won't have to put that statement to the test," Tiger said.

"Well, is he going to come back? What's the situation like?" Cathy asked, leaning forward in her seat.

"The dwarfs are resting, same as our troops," Ami said. "They lost proportionally more soldiers than we did, but they still outnumber us."

"Who did we lose?" Cathy asked with a serious expression.

"I don't have precise numbers yet, but the majority of our permanent casualties were goblins," Ami answered, lowering her head as her

thoughts went to the morgue. "I hoped you'd talk to your subordinate officers -" Ami hesitated, not having had the time to familiarise herself with them yet.

"Algot, Brom, and Kalres," Cathy supplied.

"Thank you, yes. Get the details from them later. And pass them on to me, please."

"Will do."

"The dragons are all fine, but most of the reaperbots need repairs, so we'd have to manage without those somehow if we were attacked right now. Oh, and your own armour is in bad shape, too."

Cathy snorted. "I can't imagine why."

"Damage to the dungeon isn't too bad," Ami continued. "We lost the outer perimeter tunnels, but those were designed to be expendable. I hope we'll be able to replace them before the dwarfs are ready to attack again. Right now, the imps are still busy fixing the bombardment holes in the core areas."

"Empress Mercury, may I come in?" a female voice sounded in Ami's head.

Ami gave her permission, and for a moment, the lights went out.

When they came back on, a cloaked figure wearing a hood was kneeling in front of Ami. "Your Majesty."

"At ease, Umbra," Ami said. "Have a seat while we wait for the others to arrive."

"Congrats on returning with all your limbs still attached this time!" Tiger teased as the other youma rose in a smooth motion.

The door opened at that point, drawing Ami's attention and making her miss Umbra's reply. Both Jadeite and Torian stepped in at the same time, with the result that they bumped into each other and got stuck in the doorway. They glared at each other, neither willing to let the other pass first. In the end, Jadeite used his superior strength to

muscle his way past the warlock, who stumbled and hurried to rush in after the dark general.

Ami's eyes were mostly on Jadeite, who had recently re-summoned his uniform as it showed no sign of wear and tear yet.

"Your Majesty," he said with a confident grin as he bowed, one arm held over his chest.

"Jadeite," she returned the greeting. "Please have a seat."

Tiger poked her in the shoulder, drawing her attention. "Do you want me to move so he can sit here?" she asked with a wink.

Ami felt her face grow hot and gripped her collar nervously. "N-no, I-"

"At this point, an elbow to the ribs is the appropriate course of action," Cathy advised in a deadpan tone of voice.

"Congratulations to your inspiring victory, your Imperial Majesty!" Torian said as he bowed deeply. His fingers were gripping his staff so hard his knuckles showed brighter.

"Thank you," Ami answered, grateful for a reason to ignore Tiger. "Feel free to join the others." She gestured towards the seated people.

Torian smiled, showing his teeth, and immediately went for the armchair closest to her.

A group of two orcs and one troll in high-quality metal armour waited in front of the door. The troll was tall and narrow for someone of his species, and might not have fit through the doorway if he had been standing straight.

"Come in you three," Cathy called. "Empress, these are my sub-commanders Brom-"

One of the orcs, short but broad-shouldered and built like a barrel, saluted.

"- Algot- "

The tall troll saluted.

"- and Kalres."

The lone female of the trio had her white hair in a tight bun, which shook from the crispness of her salute.

"At ease," Ami told them. "Ah, and there are the final participants."

The dark elves Eline and Venna strode in through the door with steps so light Ami almost couldn't hear them. They turned towards her and stopped at a respectful distance. "Your Majesty," both of them said as they bowed simultaneously. What really drew Ami's attention was the black eye that Venna sported, contrasting sharply with her milk-white skin.

Had she been in a fight? She should have been safe deep inside the dungeon, looking after the civilians. Ami's gaze swept over the small crowd standing more or less tense before her. "Don't worry about protocol, this is an informal meeting," she told them. "Please, have a seat. To start with, does anyone know of urgent issues I need to be made aware of?"

The orcs and the troll exchanged glances, and then the widest member of the trio took a small, reluctant step forward.

Ami smiled at the orc. "Yes, Brom, was it?"

The pink-skinned creature nodded. "Uh, I'm not sure it's really urgent or if you don't know already, your Majesty," he said, fidgeting. "Bunch of the guys weren't happy with the restrictions they had to fight under and are talking about leaving. They say fighting with one hand tied is too dangerous. A dozen or so already took their gold and left."

Ami had been expecting something along those lines, but still found it alarming. With the dwarven numerical advantage, she couldn't really afford her own numbers to deplete much further. On the other hand, she didn't think that coercing her soldiers to stay and fight for her would result in a satisfying performance, even if she had been

willing to do that.

Little beads of sweat formed on Brom's forehead as Ami pondered the problem in silence. "I obviously know they are wrong! They aren't thinking far enough ahead. All those prisoners we took will make us stronger once you torture them into joining us!"

Ami clenched her teeth, trying hard to keep her expression neutral. That was certainly not the plan. How would he react to learning that?

"Do any of you have suggestions for making sure we don't lose more troops in the short run?" Jadeite asked before she could think of a good reply.

"Um, Maybe, um, offer a bounty for each live prisoner brought in?" Brom asked, looking at Ami for guidance.

"Your Majesty, I must object!" Torian said, rising from his seat. "Such an incentive would simply lead to backstabbing as the brutes would try to claim the most bounties for themselves!"

"He has a point," Cathy agreed.

"Pool the bounties, split the pool evenly," Kalres suggested, her eyes darting from person to person.

"That might work," Ami said. In a way, having those of her underlings who didn't want to play by her rules leave was a good thing. "We'll replace those who left," she decided. "Jered is already contacting the local orc tribes, but we can step up recruitment efforts in the Underworld too."

She only had one portal, but there were other options.

"We can use the portals on the Avatar Islands, too. As long as people are merely passing through quickly, the corruption won't harm them too much." She looked Brom over more closely.

His equipment was in good shape, his hair was fairly clean for an orc, and he had shown some responsibility by bringing the unwelcome news of discontent to her attention.

"Can I entrust this recruitment mission to you?" Ami asked him with a short sideways glance at Cathy.

The blonde nodded once in approval.

"Yes, your Majesty!" Brom saluted and stood as straight as his bent stature would allow him. "The hirelings will want to see gold, though," he added after a moment. "And I'll need an escort to secure the way. And workers to raise the portal monoliths back into position."

"Granted." Ami remotely moved some gold from her treasury around and placed it in a locked room not far from the portal. She held up her hand, and a key appeared in front of Brom. "An imp will direct you to the room holding the required funds," she said.

The orc dropped on one knee as he snatched the key out of the air under the envious looks of his companions. "Thank you, my Empress."

Jadeite turned his head to stare at him, his eyes gleaming with a white light within. "Remember, responsibility for this mission lies with you. Do make sure to document your expenses, as I will be going over them later."

Brom paled, and his shoulders drooped. "O-of course."

Ami's smile turned a little strained. Her employees came from the Underworld, and assuming the worst of them was simply common sense. "Thank you, Jadeite." She turned to the crowd. "Is there anything else that went wrong?"

Venna raised her hand. "Well, I have some good news and some bad news," she said. "The bad news is that the civilians are getting unruly. For some unfathomable reason, they don't like the new fashions you devised. We had the beginnings of a riot on hands there," she said, raising a hand to her black eye.

"What did you do?" Ami asked, dreading the answer.

"Well, before we could do something, the lights flickered and the farms shut down and disgorged a huge swarm of insects," the dark

elf said.

Ami raised her eyebrows. The farms' power failing during the battle was not unexpected, but their fading metabolism magic should not have resulted in accelerated insect growth. Oh, who was she kidding? She had a warm, damp dungeon and a corruption theme of fertility. An insect plague had probably been inevitable. She really needed to try and tweak those settings some more, and maybe give the dwarfs a hard time while she was at it.

"- buzzing and crawling everywhere, and then Eline got the bright idea of telling the civilians that the bugs were a warning from you, and that got them to back down, which is the good news," Venna chattered on. "Except now we have huge piles of bugs all over the place. Can't move a step without making crunching noises." She paused. "I guess that's bad news too?"

"Can we have them?" the troll officer - Algot - interrupted Ami's train of thought.

"Excuse me?"

"The bugs," the leathery-skinned being elaborated. "They'd go really well with chicken. Nice and crunchy. " He was salivating.

"You want to eat the bugs," Ami noted in a small voice. She glanced around the room and noted that neither Torian nor Eline or Venna looked surprised. Well, if the trolls wanted the insects, that would leave more of the real food for the rest. "Yes, sure, go right ahead. Anyone can take as many as they want."

"Thank you, your Majesty!"

Not that she thought that a little predation would solve the problem. The insects couldn't stay in the living quarters, but she had no immediate plan to get rid of them. Sure, she could convey her wishes to the primitive minds inside her dungeon - one by one. That wasn't going to help with a swarm. "Torian, do you know any spells to get rid of insect infestations?"

"Certainly. Fireball works wonders," the warlock commented dryly.

"However, getting them to move under their own power and without leaving bits all over the place is more the Vermin Lord's area of expertise. Perhaps your hostage abbot knows some applicable crop preservation spells, too."

Not a bad suggestion, Ami figured. "Anything else? Do you have a way to use sympathetic magic on one bug to affect the rest?"

"Despite our recent successes on the battlefield, I do not know of any spells that could be used to affect one living being through another," the warlock said, shaking his head. "Obviously, if you wanted me to research something along those lines, I could initiate a project to- "

"Your Majesty," Kalres interrupted, "as we are under siege, I would prefer it if any magical resources were directed towards the war effort. How much magical support can we troops expect in the field?"

"That is a question of finances, really," Ami answered, a little surprised by the orc taking charge.

In her Keeper sight, her rows of gem furnaces stood mostly inert, holding tiny, deformed sapphire growth. It looked as if the troubles with the electrical grid had not spared their current crop. It wasn't a total loss, as she would still get some gold from the partially grown sapphires, but the furnaces needed a good cleaning.

"When in doubt, I would rather spend gold on properly fortifying the dungeon rather than on spells," she elaborated. Optimally, she would be able to seal off her dungeon with steel walls, foiling further invasion attempts.

"I, too, would prefer not to attack before our forces are stronger," Kalres agreed readily.

"For now, any potential offensive operations against the dwarfs would be aimed only at crippling their ability to launch another invasion," Ami assured her. She turned her attention to her two magical specialists. "Jadeite and Torian, do you have anything to add? Could you apply the way you countered the dwarfs in an

offensive manner?"

"Doubtful, your Majesty," Torian said, barely pre-empting Jadeite's answer. He shot the dark general a smug look. "We exploited a unique weakness that existed due to the dwarfs being in a rush. I would be incredibly surprised if they made the same mistake while constructing their home base."

"In that case, I want you to focus our research more on defensive applications," Ami instructed.

"Your wish is my command, my Empress."

Ami addressed the corner of the room blanketed in unnatural darkness. "Umbra, you have been to the dwarven camps. Have you seen or heard anything particularly noteworthy?"

"Between smashing siege equipment, wards, and them being able to see me in the dark, I was not able to do a lot of spying," Umbra said. "I overheard parts of a conversation about reinforcements and supplies arriving through the tunnels in the next few days."

"Tunnels? They must have been talking about one of their towns." Ami was certain that the dwarfs couldn't have dug a tunnel out to her location yet, even with their impressive digging speed. The dungeon was a few days walk away from their closest fortress. A pre-existing network perhaps? In any case, the presence of a hero gate above made reinforcements anywhere nearby something she couldn't afford to ignore. Reason enough to have a look. "Excuse me for a moment while I investigate." She transported a crystal ball from the library and had it float above her lap.

Tiger leaned over her shoulder, looking on with curiosity as the sphere lit up and showed the outside the of the dungeon.

Ami decided to pick the closest dwarven town for her scrying. Most of it was underground, but there were two impressive walls surrounding the buildings and the fortress on the surface. As she zoomed in on the dwellings nestled between the inner and outer wall, she couldn't help feel some admiration for the masonry. The individual blocks were put together so neatly that one would have

had trouble to put even a knife's blade between the gaps.

As she got closer to the fortress, a bell engraved with a fern-like pattern started ringing by itself on top of the fortifications. Nearby, a short, grey-bearded guard dozing with his back against the crenellations jolted upright. He looked around wide-eyed, his head whipping left and right. His pale face turned towards the sky briefly, eyebrows furrowed. After a last glance back at the rune-covered bell, he sprinted into the nearest tower and slammed the door closed behind him.

After the initial moment of surprise that she had triggered some kind of spying alarm, Ami felt a little guilty as she watched the frightened inhabitants.

Dwarfs disappeared into buildings, jumped down hatches, and slammed down shutters. Within moments, the streets had cleared of all living things aside from some cats and dogs.

That wasn't what she had intended at all. While it was good to know that the dwarfs had working scrying detection, she would have much preferred observing them without disturbing them. Well, since it was too late for that now, she might as well follow through and keep the disruption of their lives down to this single time. She propelled her perspective down the main street, which lead straight to the mountainside and ended at a set of large double doors.

The physical obstacle was no barrier to Ami's crystal ball, and her point of view entered a large hall. At least she assumed that it was a large hall, since it was too dark to see much beyond a pair of large, square pillars. Movement overhead at a grate-covered window drew her attention just in time to see a shutter descend, rendering the place even darker. Some distance away, a dwarf-shaped silhouette placed a hood over another light, decreasing visibility even more.

Ami clenched her teeth as she realised that they were extinguishing all light sources. Unlike the dwarfs, she couldn't see in the dark.

"Well, that's a whole lot of blackness," Tiger commented, still leaning over Ami's shoulder.

Ami clenched her teeth and made her viewpoint hop from one fading light to the next, trying to stay ahead of the dwarfs as she chased the last vestiges of brightness.

A dropped torch got her further along the street, a patch of fluorescent fungus ahead a little deeper still. Then, a portcullis slammed down, cutting her off from all light. Still, the street had been straight and leading down at a constant angle so far.

Ami quickly rushed her point of view further in the same direction. For a few breathless seconds, she feared she had lost her opportunity, but then she saw the faintest hints of lights ahead.

Engravings that shone from within, already three-quarters hidden behind descending stone shutters, still provided enough illumination for her to confirm the presence of a large tunnel stretching off somewhere into the distance.

Wide-eyed, Ami stared at her crystal ball - or rather, at the parallel metal tracks visible on the tunnel floor within. "They have railways?"

Last edited: Aug 26, 2016

Dwarven Infrastructure

Originally on 2015-08-14T18:27:00

A large imp wearing a blue and black senshi uniform was lying on her belly under a thick bush. With three-fingered hands, she parted its wide-leafed branches so she could peer downhill at the dwarven town below, her eyes glowing purplish through her visor.Ami couldn't see much of the walls and the slate-tiled roofs from her current vantage point because high grass and a knobbly tree root obstructed her line of sigh. Fortunately, she was not here to spy on the surface structures. The dwarven railway - about whose existence she dearly hoped to be mistaken - would be underground. Having verified that there were no hunters or shepherds nearby who could stumble over her hiding spot by accident, she slowly crawled backwards, taking care not to rustle the leaves too much.

More and more of the town disappeared behind the hill's slope as she retreated from its steepest part. Finally, the flags on the highest towers sank beneath the horizon, leaving her surrounded by nothing but vegetation and the distant countryside.

Satisfied that she couldn't be spotted from below, Ami rose and headed for a rough-barked tree. She sat down against its trunk and wiped her fingers on the grass, carefully cleaning all the earth from her gloves before she reached into her backpack and retrieved a crystal ball.

On a branch above her, a magpie cawed and tilted its head to the side as it eyed the glittering sphere speculatively.

Ami shot the bird a suspicious look and clutched the scrying device on her lap tighter. It still had an important role to play in her plan, but that was for later. Her next step relied on a Keeper power she had only rarely found a use for up to now. She closed her eyes and focused on getting into the state of mind of a Keeper who wanted to place a new dungeon heart.

Immediately, the world erupted into loud, aggressive buzzing from

every direction.

Ami jumped to her feet, hands raised to protect her face from the incoming onslaught of huge, stinging insects. It took her a moment to realise that the threatening noises had disappeared the instant she had lost her concentration. Feeling a little embarrassed, she sat back down and recovered her crystal ball.

The last time she had used that particular power, she had been in the dead wastelands of the Avatar Islands. Here, the environment was teeming with all kinds of life that produced a constant stream of background noises that she had been unprepared for.

She tried again, pushing her expanding awareness underground immediately.

The sound of insects receded, replaced by the groaning of wooden roots as trees swayed in the wind, the trickle of water making its way through worm tunnels, and the indistinct murmur of uncountable tiny digging creatures.

Ami briefly directed her attention to an ant colony that vibrated from the activity of thousands of legs, then to the scraping noises coming from a fox den she had spotted earlier. Both locations didn't feel hollowed-out to her Keeper sense, so perhaps it only indicated spaces large enough to fit at least an imp in? Curious, she shifted her focus even deeper, into the underground parts of the dwarven town.

The settlement expanded farther underground than it did above, and it was much louder than the natural noises that Ami had just encountered. Doors slammed like gunshots, thundering footsteps echoed through the halls, and a waterfall roared and hissed amidst a cacophony of clattering metal.

On second thought, Ami decided that the waterfall was only a boiling kettle. Her Keeper sense was definitely prioritising some kinds of sound over others, increasing the volume on liquid and impact noises while drowning out voices and music. At a guess, the former two would be more useful for finding caves and cracks within deep, quiet rock layers.

The amplified clang from a hammer striking metal was particularly loud, and the continued ringing of the anvil made it impossible to hear anything else in its vicinity.

Ami fled from the unpleasant noise, leaving the neighbourhood of the smithy by directing her attention to a quieter part of the town. By navigating away from the densest concentrations of footsteps, she eventually arrived at what she suspected to be its outskirts.

So far, listening to the ambient noises hadn't told her much about the town's internal organisation. The area was so saturated with sounds that she couldn't discern the tiny echoes that would tell individual rooms apart. With all those disturbances, it wasn't possible for her to discern where a train station would be.

This didn't discourage her at all. She directed her attention farther out to the northern side of the town, reasoning that the tracks she had seen in the crystal ball had led in that direction. Finding a long, hollowed-out space that extended beyond the town's borders should be feasible. Since she didn't know the exact depth of the tunnel, she would have to include an up-and-down zigzagging motion into her search pattern while she pushed her perception from the west to the east.

The faint noise of something rolling in the distance mixed with the muted background hum of the settlement intruded on her search.

A train or wagon? Her heart beating faster, Ami chased after the sound. She moved past a pair of squelching footsteps and crossed a grid of empty-sounding tunnels on her way. Was she passing through an abandoned part of the town? She heard water dripping into puddles, indicating a state of disrepair.

Ahead, the rolling noise picked up again, tinged with the ringing of metal. It continued for a few seconds until it stopped, replaced by the stomping of two heavy boots.

Ami memorised the location and let her perception return to normal as she looked at the crystal ball in her hands. Would she set off a scrying alarm if she tried to take a look? The problem wasn't the dwarfs extinguishing all lights. Darkness was not an effective

counter against her scrying when she was nearby and knew where to remotely place some light spells.

Instead, she worried about the dwarfs mistaking her investigation as preparations for an invasion. She didn't want to provoke them into doing something rash, as the last thing she needed was another immediate assault on her dungeon.

Shuddering at the thought, she wondered if their scrying detection worked like her own. If it did, then the detector would need to visible in her crystal ball to be triggered. While that was almost inevitable when spying on a town from the sky, it should be an acceptably low risk when she was trying to see the inside of a tunnel outside the settlement. Prepared for the worst, she activated the orb.

The mirror-smooth surface changed from showing a distorted reflection of her imp-face to solid darkness, as was to be expected from an unlit location.

Proceeding according to her plan, Ami added a light spell to the spot she was scrying on, but the image in the orb did not change in any way.

Mildly disappointed that she hadn't hit her target on the first try, but unsurprised - locating something by sound wasn't especially precise - she adjusted her aim and tried again.

The scrying device stubbornly remained blank even after she peppered the area at random with another bunch of lights.

By now, she was getting a little nervous. Was a ward cancelling out her light spells? It would make sense to protect a train against hostile magic. To gain some distance from the potential obstacle, she moved the orb's point of view through the surrounding rock.

Something flashed violet within the crystal. A pre-existing light source?

Quickly, she backtracked to its location and found a muddy tunnel covered in in bulbous, violet mushrooms.

The light was coming from a young dwarf wearing glowing

wristbands. It shifted with his every motion, bobbing up and down as he shovelled sticky muck from a wheelbarrow onto the artificial rock shelves on which the densely-packed fungi grew.

His wheelbarrow had a metal-clad wheel.

Ami hung her head. In her eagerness, she had followed a wheelbarrow to some kind of farm. At least, she comforted herself, he remained unaware of her scrying. She considered the pile of fertiliser inside the wheelbarrow.

Moist and dense-looking, it had to weigh a lot. It was unlikely that he had driven it out here all the way from the settlement.

Acting on impulse, she decided to backtrack his path. At worst, she would spend a few minutes to find nothing but a large pile of manure nearby, and it wasn't as if she had any better leads yet.

Even with only the dim light coming from his wristbands, his tracks were clearly visible. The wheel had left a shallow groove on the mud-stained ground, clearly visible until it disappeared into the darkness behind a bend.

Ami projected a weak light spell, no brighter than a candle, into the shadows. To her relief, it appeared with no issues, proving that the previous failures were simply due to her casting the spells into solid rock. Continuing down the tunnel, she idly wondered if the mushrooms lining its walls were edible for humans. Food variety in her dungeon could be better, and those fungi wouldn't even need light to grow inside her farm rooms.

She found a large heap of fertiliser at the end of the tunnel, underneath some dirt stains running vertically up the wall. Following them, she spotted a dirty mine cart on a ledge above, standing on train tracks.

Upon seeing the vehicle, she would have loved to jump to the comforting conclusion that she had simply mistaken mining infrastructure for a railway. However, if the dwarfs were already applying mining technology to agriculture, then they could also be using it for transport and travel in general. The main limiting factor,

in that case, would be propulsion.

Moving her vantage point closer to the squat, square cart, she noticed another alarming detail. A hook was protruding from the iron vehicle's front, clearly designed for attaching it to another.

While the cart did have handles for manually pulling or pushing it, it also looked very heavy. She didn't think she would be able to pull more than a single full cart unless she was transformed. So far, she hadn't seen any of the dwarfs perform feats of superhuman strength, and a cursory inspection of the tracks revealed no evidence of draft animals either.

How would they move a chain of carts? For her own safety, she needed to investigate further.

After moving her point of view along the rails for a while, she spotted a light source in the distance. Wary about raising alarms, she inched her field of view towards the edge of the illuminated cave. Still working on the principle that a scrying detector would not spot her unless she established line of sight with it, she moved as if she was sneaking around physically. Thus, she remained focused on the ground until she spotted shadows indicating that she was next to a pile of crates. Shifting her viewing angle, she examined the wooden boxes.

They were filled with mushrooms from the farm, their stems cut cleanly near the bottom with a sharp tool.

Ami would have expected the ones at the bottom of the pile to be squished into a messy paste from the weight, but apparently, they had a texture more akin to raw potatoes than to the softer fungi she was used to.

One of the uppermost crates suddenly rose into the air, leaving a gap in the stack that showed her much more of the cave than she had originally planned.

She froze, waiting for an alarm to go off, but when nothing

happened, she zoomed out further to see the entire place.

With a single glance, she could see that it was some kind of loading and unloading area for agricultural products. Next to the nearby stack of filled boxes, more mushrooms lay on spread out cloths and waited to be packed. Empty wheelbarrows stood near a closed door, and the gravity-challenged crate that had surprised her was in fact dangling from a small crane.

She turned her attention to the complicated-looking wooden contraption. Equipped with pulleys and a swivelling arm, it looked as if it could reach every spot of the circular chamber. Gears and axles turned inside as a red faced-dwarf cranked a winch, sweat running down his brow.

The crane's operator had a seat higher on the apparatus and was yanking levers to manoeuvre its cargo towards a chain of connected mine carts.

Ami felt the muscles of her imp face twitch and noticed she was glaring at the train, frustrated by its mere existence. The question foremost in her mind now was how much of a threat it posed to her. Determined to find out how it worked, she directed her attention to the larger, roofed wagon at its front end.

She was hesitant to call it an engine, since, as far as she could tell, the wedge-tipped vehicle had no propulsion aside from a set of seats with pedals. It was as muscle-powered as the crane. While she considered that reassuring, it didn't necessarily mean she was safe.

Her attention briefly turned towards the cave's light source. There were small alcoves where normally would have been torches affixed to the wall, each holding a statuette of a squat, armoured figure. Every stone carving carried on its head a glass disc that shone like a miniature sun. Those lamps were a good reminder that the dwarfs were fond of creating enchanted objects and that she shouldn't let a first impression deceive her.

She made her view circle the train, considering it within its surroundings. She could easily deduce that it had been parked at

the top of a ramp so it could be pushed down and gain speed when it left the station fully-loaded. Obviously, it had arrived on one prong of the horseshoe-shaped track, been unloaded, pulled up the ramp, and now waited to be filled with the harvest.

Nothing so far indicated that it was able to move under its own power.

Ami glanced at the lavish illumination again. If the dwarfs had enough mana for something like that, then they could certainly enhance a few carts if they wanted to. She examined the underside of the engine and found a number of runes that she didn't recognise. With the aid of her fabrication spell, she copied them onto a sheet of paper so she could show them her warlocks later.

With the paper safely stashed away inside her backpack, she made another pass around the engine. It had a number of evenly-spaced indentations along both of its sides where the metal looked worn, but their exact purpose remained unclear to her. All things considered, the engine looked less advanced than she had feared, but that didn't necessarily mean that it was *slow*, at least over short distances. Besides, simple things could be more easily replaced than complicated ones.

She tapped her finger against the crystal ball, thinking about what the verified existence of enemy trains meant. If she assumed that they were only muscle-powered and moved with the speed of a bike, they were still much faster than a soldier on foot. Just as importantly, they could travel through the mountains on a path that ignored the intervening terrain. When she considered them from that point of view, then the technical specifications of the engines were secondary to the extent of the network and the number of trains that existed.

Which meant that she needed to figure out just how connected the dwarven settlements really were.

With a puff of smoke, Ami appeared inside the empty tunnel she had chosen as her destination. It counted as claimed territory, so she

couldn't simply transport an imp inside, but that was why she was possessing one who had learned how to teleport herself. Arriving in mid-air and upside-down hadn't been part of the plan.

Quickly, she tucked in her legs to increase her spinning speed. Despite the glowing smoke cloud from her arrival interfering with her visor's night vision, she managed to hit the ground feet-first, if at an awkward angle. She waved her arms to keep her balance, took a few rapid steps forward, and tripped over one of the metal rails.

Her imp arms were just a little too short to reach the wall and steady herself.

On the ground, uninjured but annoyed, she decided that imp teleportation had to be the result of malicious design on the part of the dark gods. Why else would a short-legged creature who typically carried a heavy backpack need to perform a somersault in order to activate a magical ability?

It was almost enough of an inconvenience to make her reconsider her other scouting option, but only almost. She would have to scry on a spot, cast a light spell, move her scrying target to the edge of the light radius, cast a new light, and repeat the previous steps. Over a distance of many kilometres. Not only would it be a tedious process, it would also take more time than simply teleporting around.

Besides, being physically present let her investigate the system in more detail than watching it through a crystal ball. She could start with the wall she had almost smashed her head into.

She placed her fingers against the rock, barely finding purchase on the smoothly-hewn stone as she pushed herself to her feet. Her gaze moved upwards, following the wall as it curved to form a graceful arc above the two parallel-running railway tracks.

This tunnel was larger than the ones from the farming station, and its shape was so regular that she wouldn't have been surprised to learn that it had been made by a large digging machine. In her mind, she pictured something like a battering ram, with a huge drill at the front that ate its way through the underground like a dwarven

pickaxe.

Speculation aside, the rails merited additional attention. Contrary to her expectations, they weren't made from metal, or even assembled from pieces larger than her current body. Each rail consisted of individual pieces of carved stone, slotted next to each other like a very low and narrow brick wall. They stood so close together that they would have been hard to recognise as separate if it wasn't for discontinuities in colouration.

In her opinion, stone, even if it was plentiful - the pieces for the rails had obviously been carved from the surrounding rock - was too brittle and prone to splintering for what it was being used here. She squatted down to have a closer look, fully expecting to find abrasions, cracks, and other signs of wear.

While the rounded, topmost part of the rail had been worn so smooth it gleamed, she didn't discover any structural damage with her superficial inspection. She raised her hand, searched for a moment before she found the earring on the imp's unfamiliar head shape, and adjusted her visor's vision mode.

On the display, the stone gained a faint aura that indicated a weak magical charge, concentrated more within the lower parts that were hidden underground. If Ami was interpreting the numbers correctly, then the enhancements were meant to reinforce the rail against the effects of weight and pressure.

Ami looked up and down the tunnel, following the faintly-glowing lines of the rails that faded into the distance in both directions. Not for the first time, she wondered how the dwarfs were able to support all this without a dungeon heart.

Well, she wouldn't get answers by standing here, and she still needed to find out where this railway led. Since the town closest to her dungeon was to the south, she turned towards the north and looked at the farthest parts of the tracks she could still see. With a soft sigh, she ran a few steps to gain enough speed for a somersault.

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Hidden Mechanisms

Originally on 2015-08-28T22:33:00

After using imp teleportation a few more times, Ami had adapted to arriving mid-somersault. She landed on the tracks with only a minor stumble, straightened, and prepared for her next hop farther down the tunnel.

Something moved farther ahead, catching her attention and making her hesitate.

The monochromatic display of her visor showed her the back of a train. A few helpful annotations around it told her that it wasn't going very fast, moving at around twenty-one point seventy-two kilometres per hour and decelerating.

She didn't want to be spotted, so this was a bit of a problem. If she teleported ahead of the train, then the passengers would definitely notice the green flash. They might not be able to identify her in the darkness, but they would know that something strange was going on. Gathering information would be much harder when everyone was on high alert, and she really hoped she would be able to find a map of the railway network somewhere.

Perhaps she had been lucky. The train was slowing down, so it might be nearing a station. If it hadn't warned her, she might have teleported somewhere where people could see her. In any case, a train in motion was a perfect opportunity for finding out if there was something more to its engine than just muscle power.

Given teleportation's highly-visible side effects, she couldn't just appear next to the train, but she had other options. With a short leap, she moved to the free area between the two parallel tracks and broke into a run. She was possessing an imp body enhanced with senshi enchantments, and the little creature knew a speed-boosting spell on top of it. Unless the train suddenly accelerated, she would catch up in no time.

The vehicle made life easier for her by continuing to decelerate until it was moving at a crawl.

She hoped that nobody on the train would look backwards while she approached. While she was tiny at the moment, her red-glowing eyes could still give her away in the darkness. After briefly considering sunglasses fit for an imp, she regretfully came to the conclusion that they would interfere with her visor's night vision - in addition to looking ridiculous. For now, she simply hoped that any dwarfs who turned to face her would not see enough, their eyes still used to looking at the part of the tunnel illuminated by the engine's head lights.

Ahead, said tunnel split into two branches, one for each track.

Ami briefly wondered why they stayed parallel instead of one of them veering off and leading elsewhere. As she inspected the walls, she noticed a brighter gap ahead and slowed her step.

On the floor, a matching brighter rectangle confirmed that light was shining from a doorway.

She stopped and ducked, unwilling to approach the train while it was pulling into the suspected station.

The train came to a stop with a screeching noise and six dwarfs jumped out of the engine. Most of them positioned themselves next to the carts, but one walked towards the doorway. He was carrying something that looked like a long, thin plank with regularly-spaced marks.

A local dwarf emerged from the opening and shook hands with him. The two conversed with each other for a while, their gestures calm and relaxed. The conductor's shoulders shook, perhaps from laughing, and he pointed at one of the wagons.

With eager steps, the local walked over to it, lifted its tarp, and bent over the cart. Some rummaging later, his hand emerged holding a large bottle in his hand. He returned to the other dwarf with a bounce in his step and slapped his shoulder. Taking the proffered ruler-like object along with the bottle, he disappeared back through

the doorway.

Meanwhile, the other dwarfs were gripping the carts by their side handles and leaned against them with all of their might to push the train forward centimetre by centimetre.

Ami wondered what they were doing. From her vantage point, she could only see that the tunnel - both branches, actually - narrowed so much that there was barely any space between the sides of the engine and the walls. The remaining carts were narrower, but even for them it was a close fit.

The workers stopped pushing when the front part of the engine had disappeared into the narrowed section of the tunnel so far that only the door in the back still poked out. All of them turned to face the doorway, clearly waiting for something.

With the train standing still, Ami could hear clicking noises coming from ahead, along with the voices of the dwarfs. She also heard another strange sound and went completely still, holding her breath so she could listen better.

It was a high-pitched whirring noise that reminded her of a hungry gnat, or perhaps a dentist's drill. In any case, it was not a noise that she had ever associated with railway operation.

Finally, the local dwarf re-emerged from the doorway and returned the flat object to the conductor, nodding.

The others reacted immediately, rushed back to the engine's door and climbed back in with hurried motions.

The door had barely slammed shut when a horn echoed through the tunnel. It sounded again, and then a horrible metallic screeching noises startled Ami.

Blinking, she stared at the back of the train. Without her visor giving her the numbers, she wouldn't have noticed that it was moving again, very slowly.

Again, the screech of stressed metal assaulted her ears, and the train accelerated with a jerk that must have been unpleasant for its

passengers. It was now twice as fast as before.

Ami covered her ears as the noise repeated again and again, with each interval a little shorter than the previous one. With every repetition, the train gained more speed, an almost linear increase with each jerk. When the noises finally stopped, she stared at the final reading with a sinking feeling.

The train had left the station at a speed of almost ninety kilometres per hour.

Ami re-evaluated the railway's threat level. With that kind of periodic boost, the enemy could have soldiers from all over their nation on her doorstep within days. She needed to do something about this.

With the risks of inaction now outweighing those of discovery, she tiptoed closer to the station, eager to learn how the boost worked. The whirring got louder with every step, putting her more on edge, but she tried to look on the bright side. At least it masked the sounds of her approach.

She arrived near the doorway without difficulties and pressed herself against the wall. Quietly muttering her fabrication spell, she created a tiny mirror with a long, stick-like handle. Extending it close to the floor like a periscope, she managed to peer past the door frame.

Her caution was well worth it because her mirror showed her boots facing the door.

Angling her spying tool a little higher, she saw that the owner of said feet was sitting at a massive desk made from dark wood.

She recognized the dwarf who had come out earlier to meet the conductor. He was currently writing into a thick ledger, using a feather similar to the one sticking out of his felt hat.

Ami didn't know how he managed to concentrate with the constant whirring in the background, but perhaps the contents of the large stone mug next to him helped him stay calm. Personally, she would only grew more nervous if she was in his place. She would be worrying the entire time about spilling something on the expensive-

looking piece of furniture. While she would have loved to admire its intricately-carved geometrical patterns in greater detail, she had other priorities.

With the way the dwarf was sitting, it would be impossible to get into his office without being noticed.

She briefly considered rushing past the doorway when he lowered his eyes to investigate the narrowed section of the tunnel first, but then she had a better idea. Her gaze rose to the ceiling, confirming that there was enough space between it and the top of the doorway. She jumped, her senshi enhancements allowing the imp body to leap clear over the opening.

The moment she was past the doorway, she darted forwards, hiding in the darkness just in case the whirring noise hadn't masked the noise of her landing completely. She glanced back several times as she approached the narrowed part of the tunnel, but nobody arrived to search for her.

Inside the narrow section, the noise was even louder than outside, and the walls were completely straight and vertical. Their defining features were the horizontal slits located at the height of Ami's head, placed in pairs that faced each other. Parts of steel cogwheels poked out, the edges of their teeth scraped blank by wear and tear.

They weren't moving right now, but she could see that they were about the right size to match up with the strange indentations in the sides of the engine she had observed back at the mushroom-packing station. If the cogwheels gripped the engine properly and had enough raw strength behind them, they could conceivably accelerate a vehicle.

She looked farther down the tunnel, spotting more pairs of cogwheels facing each other. That confirmed her hypothesis. The system would have to be calibrated precisely, and any inaccuracies would result in unpleasant jerks for the passengers, but it could work.

Her visor informed her about a heat source behind one of the walls, on the same side as the doorway. Intrigued, she wondered about

what kind of power source the dwarfs were using. She placed one ear against the rock to listen in more closely, and managed to make out a rattling noise despite the whirring. The stone against her skin vibrated, as if shaken by a sound much deeper than the loud whirring.

As much as she liked solving riddles, she just didn't have the time to figure out what was going on the hard way. Quietly, she crossed her arms and cast Shabon Spray, surrounding her current location with obscuring mist.

The inside of the magical fog cloud swallowed a flash of green, then another a few seconds later.

Ami had returned from her brief trip back to her dungeon holding a rat, which was wriggling excitedly in her grip. She stroked the animal's head with a finger to calm it down - it hadn't appreciated the somersault any more than she did - and placed it on the ground.

A moment of concentration later, a trail of black lightning connected her with the rodent, and the red light in the imp's eyes died down.

The world appeared to grow much larger around Ami as she took possession of the rat's senses.

Mentally, she ordered the imp to stay put and moved her new body towards the doorway. As a rat, even if noticed, she wouldn't be much cause for alarm. She jumped up the two stairs looming before her and hurried through the entrance, hoping that the dwarf didn't have a pet cat.

Her first proper glimpse of the room's interior surprised her with the quality of its interior decoration, which seemed fit more for a mansion than for a random train station's office. Even the floor tiles were so smooth that her claws found little purchase, and she skidded almost all the way underneath the desk before she managed to brake.

It wasn't a bad observation spot as long as she made sure she didn't get kicked. The dwarf above certainly wouldn't be able to see her through the thick wooden surface.

With great interest, she analysed the various charts and diagrams carved directly into the shiny wood panelling. As far as she could tell, many of them were tables meant to associate weight and wagon types with various line patterns similar to the one the conductor had brought earlier.

Next to the references were two glass tubes connected to the floor that reminded her of huge thermometers, complete with scale and liquid inside. According to the numbers next to them, they measured weight, rather than temperature.

To Ami, it was clear that they had to be involved in measuring the weight of the trains waiting in the tunnels outside. While she hadn't noticed any mechanism for it, she hadn't been paying particular attention to the ground. Nevertheless, everything she was seeing in the room so far confirmed what she had already suspected. Accelerating the trains required precise, individualised calculations and adjustments. Since she didn't see any controls here, they had to be past the door in the north wall, closer to the source of the noise.

She slowly approached said obstacle, staying close to the wall behind the dwarf's back. The door looked just as sturdy and well-crafted as the rest of the room's furniture, and there was barely any gap underneath it. There was also a complete lack of convenient rat-sized gaps or holes. She would have to risk opening the door.

Guided by rodent instincts, she climbed up the vertical surface, using its engravings as footholds. A valiant leap, and she was hanging off the handle with her forelegs, in immediate danger of sliding off the smooth metal. Kicking her hind legs, she managed to touch the door and awkwardly pushed herself upwards. When she was finally sitting on the handle, she treated her current body like an underling and moved it downwards with her Keeper telekinesis. The pressure was unpleasant, but the handle tilted downwards before the push could become painful.

At once, a gust of warm air blew the door open and scattered the documents on the desk, prompting a startled curse from the dwarf as he jumped to his feet.

Ami was flung off the handle when the door slammed against the

wall, and she dropped to the floor. Disoriented, she heard the dwarf stomp closer. At least she had landed between the door and the wall where he couldn't see her.

"Lorga! What do you think you are doing?" the dwarf yelled as he walked past her.

"What?" a young-sounding voice shouted back, barely audible over the whirring.

Ami darted out of her hiding spot when the door started closing. The dwarf was pulling it shut as he passed through, and she dashed forward to slip in before it was too late.

The door slammed shut with a loud bang and only missed taking off the tip of her tail by a hair's width.

"Lorga! Take off the damn earplugs when I'm talking to you!"

A female dwarf who looked only slightly older than Ami was sitting on a stool amidst a thicket of levers. Large blue eyes blinked in the direction of the doorway as she tugged something that looked like a fluffy headset off her head. "What is it, old man? Did you forget something?"

"I want to know what you were doing at the door instead of concentrating on your job, you useless apprentice!"

Lorga glanced over at a complicated assembly of cogwheels and spinning axles, most of which disappeared into the ceiling.

"Have you been drinking the special brew again? I haven't moved from this spot at all!"

While the two argued, Ami was inspecting the mechanism. Most of it seemed to be dedicated to switching out cogwheels of different sizes in order to adjust their rotation speeds.

"Don't play dumb! Am I supposed to believe that the door opened all by itself?"

"But I really didn't- ow!"

Lorga rubbed her head where the older dwarf had smacked her with his knuckle and glared at him, a pout on her freckled face.

"Don't lie to me! Do you see anyone else who could have done it?"

Ami felt bad for getting the innocent apprentice into trouble, but most of her attention was captivated by what had to be the power source she had been looking for.

A enormous flywheel made of stone was spinning like a top on the far side of the hall.

She gaped at the device's dimensions. It was wider than her dungeon heart and had to weigh several tons. How was it spinning without losing most of its energy to friction, falling apart, or at least destroying the floor underneath it?

Her gaze wandered down the axle, which was equipped with cogwheels of various diameters. Against all logic, its bottom part was hair-thin. Only the light-blue gleam of the needle-like tip gave away how it managed not to collapse under the weight resting on it. An indestructible material like adamantine opened up some unusual engineering options.

The tip spun on top a small plate of adamantine, explaining how it wasn't drilling its way into the ground. The contact point between both pieces of the holy metal glowed hot from the friction and produced the loud whirring she was hearing.

The power source was actually more of a power storage device, she corrected herself. If she understood the system correctly, then Lorga's task was picking the correct combination of cogwheels for matching the speed of the rotating axles protruding from the ceiling to that of the flywheel. That way, she would be able to gradually spin it up faster and faster so that enough power to accelerate trains was stored.

"...told you it wasn't me!" Lorga was still arguing. Her eyes suddenly went wide, and she paled. "M-maybe there's an invisible monster in here with us?"

The older dwarf swept his gaze over the room, frowning.

Ami didn't like where their conversation was going and hid behind a lever. Mentally, she ordered the imp to enter the other room and have a look at the paperwork. Through the underling's eyes, she searched for hints of a map.

The records listed arrival times, departure times, weights, cargo, service fees, as well as other technical details that weren't useful to her. No map anywhere, but there had been more passenger trains than usual going north during the last few days.

"I don't sense any bones anywhere," the master of the station said after a moment, but he didn't sound entirely convinced.

"G-ghosts don't have b-b-bones," Lorga pointed out, shivering.

Ami couldn't in good conscience scare the girl more by opening the door again, especially when she had a much more efficient way to leave. She ordered the imp to move back into the tunnel and possessed it, her shadowy form passing through the wall without resistance. She didn't even have to leave the poor rat behind. Her head counted as a large enough piece of claimed territory that she could snatch it from the room with Keeper transport and drop it there.

For her trouble, she gained a few scratches as the animal launched itself off the back of her skull and fled into the tunnel, away from the noise.

She didn't interfere as it escaped, figuring that it had earned its freedom. Also, she didn't have a comfortable way to carry it when she teleported again.

Her thoughts returned to the flywheel. She still didn't know exactly what the dwarfs were using to feed it, but that had ceased to be important. Theoretically, anything that provided a more or less constant rotation would do. Windmills, draft animals, or even cranks could all work as long as there was enough time between trains. If she had to interfere with the railway network, then the mechanisms in the stations would take far more time to replace.

Ami had travelled inside the tunnel for a few more teleports when it came to an end. A large cave opened before her, its stalactites and stalagmites covered in odd blackish moss. Water ran down the walls in small rivulets, pooling at its bottom. The tracks continued on a wide, sturdy bridge that led over the quiet lake. Marble pillars and winged statues flanked them on both sides before they disappeared behind a huge gate set into the back wall of the cavern.

Just looking at the double doors with their intricate silver and golden sunburst designs made Ami want to run and hide. She was suddenly very glad she hadn't tried to stow away on a train. Entering a temple of the Light wouldn't end well for her, even if she wasn't in her own body at the time.

Keeping her eyes on the ground, she didn't even need to wonder why the dwarfs would run a railway line through a temple. After all, it was already proving effective at keeping her out, and she assumed it would also deal with spies, diseases, and other unwelcome surprises. It was clear that she wouldn't be able to continue through that route.

However, she wouldn't give up that easily. She had an imp body and a pick, and if necessary, she could dig a path around the obstacle. First, however, she needed to find out if such drastic measures were even worthwhile. Wanting to know where exactly she was, she made another somersault and disappeared in a flash of green motes.

She reappeared in bright sunshine, high up in the cool air. Before gravity could accelerate her too much, she transported herself on top of an unclaimed hill, where dense vegetation softened her landing and helped hide her from view.

Well-hidden, it didn't take her long to figure out that she had arrived at another dwarven city. She zoomed in with her visor, taking in the above-ground structures.

There were many more dwarfs than she had expected. Weapons and armour gleamed on every plaza, and she could see tents

around the city wall.

Her hackles rose when she realised that there were too many soldiers for a single city. With her visor's magnification, she could see that the militiamen training in the city were wearing insignia from at least eight different nobles. This army had been gathered from all over the region.

Quickly, she did some simple maths in her head. The army besieging her dungeon had around three-thousand soldiers serving three different nobles. Assuming that each noble here could call upon the same number of troops, then there were about eight thousand enemies here preparing to attack her.

Her breath went faster and faster when she compared potential travel times to her projected wealth growth and concluded with certainty that her defences would not be ready in time. If she remained passive, then she would be crushed.

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Urgent Decisions

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"...and that's the current situation," Ami finished, pointing at the large map that was hanging on the wall as if it was a blackboard. Her own dungeon was marked with a blue flag that had the Mercury symbol on it, while a thick red line indicated the railway connection between the two dwarven settlements.

Cathy let herself sink against the back of her chair heavily. "Another eight-thousand men already gathered," she said, a hint of disbelief in her voice. "How are we supposed to deal with that?"

"We'll have to go on the offensive and stop or delay the dwarven reinforcements," Ami said hoping that her advisers would be able to contribute some useful ideas. She looked at the faces around the table one by one.

At the leftmost place, Snyder looked as if only shock at the revelation of the latest danger was keeping him awake. He had dark circles under his wide-open eyes and was resting his head on his hands. Wrapped in a white toga, he almost looked as if he had brought a blanket.

To his right, Cathy frowned and raised her hand to her chin, only to wince as she touched one of her bandages.

"Obviously, we need to destroy the railway," Jadeite stated matter-of-factly. He was sitting in the centre, looking serious but confident - and also somewhat distracting since his conjured uniform was suffering from corruption damage.

Ami reluctantly tore her gaze away from his chest, which wasn't adequately covered by his crossed arms. "At least the acceleration stations need to go," Ami agreed. "Disabling them will give the best effect, even more so than damaging the tunnels. The enemy has enough troops to split up into different groups. One could march on while a second digs a bypass and a third fixes the cave-in. In

contrast, the stations have complicated machinery that is harder to replace. Without them, the dwarfs should take around three to four times longer to arrive here", she lectured.

Her adopted sister seemed to be only half listening and was scribbling numbers on a piece of paper. She stopped, underlined something, snorted in irritation and balled up the paper. With a careless gesture, she brushed it aside.

It landed in front of Jadeite, who was sitting next to her. The dark general shot her an irritated look. He had been glowering occasionally at the youma ever since she had managed to talk him into creating a model train with glamour. The toy was currently racing around a circular track on the table.

Ami wasn't entirely sure if he was unhappy because he found the task beneath his dignity or because she had complimented Tiger on the idea. It had saved valuable time explaining to the locals what exactly a train was.

Torian, sitting on the rightmost side of the group, leaned forward to see what Tiger was writing. Or perhaps he was trying to get a good look down her neckline, as she was still wearing what was left of her corruption-damaged senshi uniform. Even though she had tied the remaining pieces together with bands of fabric, the result resembled a daring swimsuit more than it did the original uniform.

While Ami didn't approve of the outfit, she was a little relieved that it drew attention away from her own. Whenever she had to brush aside her cloak to use her hands, she worried that the corruption had altered her shorts and shirt while nobody was looking. Why couldn't it go bother the dwarfs outside instead? Maybe she should work on that once she had some time to spare.

Her chief warlock distracted her from her discomfort. He had been quiet during her explanation; listening intently while following the model train with his eyes. After a glance at the map he said "Forgive me, your Majesty, but I'm not sure I understand every aspect of the problem. These 'trains' don't appear to be difficult to handle. Surely, they can be easily stopped?"

His fingers emerged from underneath his own vampire-like cloak, wriggling in the air. Sparks danced around a section of the track, and with a loud snap, it broke. The rails bent upwards, forming a small ramp.

The engine went over it, leapt off the tracks and right over the edge of the table. It hit the ground, and the impact smashed the wagons open, scattering tiny dwarf figures across the tiles.

It was all too easy for Ami to imagine the still figures as real corpses staring up lifelessly at the ceiling. Just like the ones in her morgue, she thought, feeling a stab of guilt. Derailing occupied trains was one of the things she wasn't prepared to do. "Stopping a few trains won't help. The real danger is logistics," she said.

"I see." Torian didn't sound entirely convinced.

"This can't be the only railway line," she elaborated. "It would make sense for every major town in the country to be connected, which means that it's possible to travel from one end to the other in only a few days." Reaching for an analogy he would be familiar with, she added "Think of it as slow Keeper transport for armies on a national scale."

Torian paled, the contrast between his skin and his black beard slowly growing more pronounced. "But, your Majesty, I vaguely remember reading somewhere that Nimbadnur has six duchies!"

"Don't forget that there's a king too," Cathy added, causing the warlock to wince.

His voice started wavering a little when he continued "Your Majesty, you will be able to tear down this railway network, right?"

Ami grimaced. "The tunnels are dark, so I would have to personally locate each of them. Even if I found them, I'd have to make them unusable over a large distance to prevent the dwarfs from simply going around the damage."

"Damnation! Is there nothing we can do?" Torian asked.

"Calm down, we won't have the entirety of the kingdom's army on

our doorstep tomorrow," Cathy said.

The warlock turned to look at her with wide, hopeful eyes. It was an expression that didn't belong his haughty features.

Ami paid close attention to the swordswoman too, wondering where her optimism came from.

"Unlike Keepers, kingdoms don't have all of their soldiers as a standing army," the blonde explained. "Most of their forces are militia, which need to be trained, equipped, and, most importantly, collected from the villages and hamlets spread across their liege lord's territory. *Those* warriors won't be able to just take a train to the gathering point."

"That's great," Ami said with a genuine smile.

Guided by her telekinesis, a piece of chalk drew a skewed circle on the map, centred on her dungeon's location. The chalk made a few more passes, adding arrows directed towards the circle from the surrounding regions.

Ami pointed at the drawn ring. "In addition, I'm reasonably certain that no tracks get closer to the dungeon than this." She was extrapolating from the lack of sufficiently large towns nearby. "From there, the enemy soldiers would need to march here on foot."

"So we'll at least see them coming," Tiger commented before resuming her scribbling.

Curious, Ami glanced at the sheet, which was filled with stroked-out lines and revisions. Maths didn't seem to come easily to her adopted sister, even if she obviously knew what she was doing. "Tiger, what exactly are you working on?" Ami addressed the black-striped youma.

"Just trying to figure out how much gold we'd need to steal in order to build enough fortifications before the dwarfs are here," Tiger said, frowning at her number-covered sheet of paper.

"And?"

"I'm not sure yet, but it looks as if it's going to work if we get the gold early enough to skip the first cycles of harvesting gems and building more furnaces."

That matched Ami's own thoughts on the issue. Due to the nature of exponential growth, any boost at the beginning would give much greater returns than a boost at a later point.

"Well," Torian said with a wide grin, "by most accounts, dwarven towns are filthy rich."

Ami didn't think the dwarfs would forgive her for stealing from them, even if she paid everything back with interest later. Much of their wealth would be in the form of art and cultural treasures, which she wouldn't be able to replace. Ignoring the moral issues, there was also a big practical problem with Torian's suggestion. "The wealth wouldn't be all conveniently in one place, just waiting for me to snatch it. I'd have to conquer and search the place."

Her chief warlock nodded, his face falling.

"Could you rob some Keeper's treasury?" Cathy suggested.

Ami perked up. "I could visit Morrigan's dungeon again."

"Your trap already went off and his minions looted everything valuable when the dungeon heart blew up," Snyder said in a tired voice. "Or so Monteraine told me. She seemed rather exuberant about his misfortune."

"Darn it. I mean, it's good, but inconvenient." Ami lowered her head. "Unfortunately, I don't know about any other enemy dungeon locations." Maybe she could ask the Avatar? In any case, getting the gold from other Keepers wouldn't be simple. Having to deal with their retaliation in addition to fending off the dwarfs would be suboptimal, too. "In fact, I don't know of any other feasible targets." She paused. "I could try mining for gold or gems instead. Do any of you know of a good location by chance?"

The locals shook their heads.

Ami sighed. It had been a long shot. "Jadeite, please have some of

the smarter employees look for natural resources," she decided, even though she didn't have high hopes for success. Anyway, setting up a proper mining operation would require time, resources, and quite possibly a new dungeon heart, and she didn't want to stretch herself too thin.

The dark general nodded. "As you wish. Does that include the youma?"

Ami considered for a moment before shaking her head. "No, I think they will be more useful for tactical operations than for information gathering. Some of Jered's hirelings should be suitable for the task."

While she hadn't paid attention to every creature that had entered her dungeon, it had been impossible to miss all of the humans with dubious backgrounds he had recruited. This would be a good test to see if his plan to turn them into a spy network was feasible.

At the mention of Jered's name, Cathy shifted and let out a wistful sigh.

Ami met the swordswoman's eyes. "Oh, I'm planning to bring Jered back here soon," she said. "Don't worry; the orcs are treating him as their honoured guest."

"I'm starting to wonder if he wouldn't be safer with them than here," Cathy quipped, but her face lit up with anticipation.

"Which brings us right back to needing a plan for stopping the soldiers that have already gathered," Ami returned to the most urgent topic. "Perhaps we could negotiate a cease-fire by using our prisoners as leverage?"

"No competent commander would save a few expendable soldiers if he could outright win the war instead," Jadeite said, dashing her hopes. "They are worthless as hostages."

Ami didn't want to believe that her opponents would be that callous. "But-"

The dark general held up one hand to signal that he wasn't done speaking yet. "That does not mean we can't use that idea. You

simply need to reconsider its scale."

"Do you have a plan?" she asked, hoping he wouldn't suggest something too questionable. Large-scale hostage taking didn't sound like something she wanted to consider, but she was running out of better alternatives.

"Threaten their civilians," Jadeite suggested. "Your airships are faster than their trains. Position some above their cities and they'll think twice about leaving them undefended."

Cathy shot a dark look in Jadeite's direction. "Yeah, it's not as if that would cause them to redouble their efforts to destroy this dungeon," she said in a scathing voice. "You do remember that that's all they need to win, right?"

"You do realise that they know the troops on the airships won't disappear just because their boss was defeated, right?" Jadeite snapped back, returning her glare.

"They'll want to protect their homes and families," Tiger said, sounding hopeful. "That's what they are fighting for. Why would they go elsewhere and leave them to die?" she asked, supporting Jadeite's plan.

"It's too risky," Cathy insisted. "We don't have enough troops to send them out on missions!"

A possibility to stop the dwarfs without bloodshed and force them to the negotiation table? Ami almost bounced with excitement. However, as Cathy had correctly pointed out, the idea could backfire catastrophically. She required more information to evaluate the risks and also had no idea how to handle the logistics yet. With her enthusiasm dampened to a healthier level, she said "Snyder, you had the most contact with the dwarven captives. Do you think Jadeite's plan could work?"

The redhead's drooping eyelids opened fully. "I-I'm not sure. The ones willing to talk to me sounded very defiant and willing to sacrifice themselves."

"Bah, they probably consider themselves dead already," Torian said with contempt. "Bravery is easy when you think you have nothing left to lose." He chuckled and rubbed his hands. "Unimaginative fools."

Ami was uncomfortably reminded of Nero. Should she really approve of this plan? It basically amounted to terrorising the enemy population. Would her friends be disappointed in her if she went along with something like it, even if it was to prevent worse?

"You know, Torian, that's a good point," Tiger said. "We could end up facing soldiers who think they have nothing left but vengeance."

Jadeite narrowed his eyes at her as if wondering which side she was on.

The warlock waved his hand dismissively. "They have to protect their cities or we take them and pick them clean of riches. Imagine the faces of their soldiers if they stood helplessly before our impenetrable defences erected with their own gold!"

Ami didn't enjoy that mental image at all, but the principle of the idea seemed sound. Of course, Torian was simplifying the situation. Garrisons could be left behind, and people would flee a doomed city with any valuables they could carry. Neither of these issues was insurmountable, but, well, she really didn't want to plan how to best rob desperate people fleeing for their lives.

"Would looting a city really provide enough money to make the dungeon safe?" Snyder asked, looking directly at Ami.

"That would depend on several factors, such as the timing and the wealth of the city," she answered. "I hope we won't have to find out and the threat alone will be enough to deter an attack."

"Even if it wasn't enough, I would not be worried," Torian spoke up again. "I'm sure that between the looted gold and her Majesty's own astounding magical reserves, she will have enough power to enslave what's left of the city's midget population. That will give us a nice, expendable army to protect us from their former brethren."

Ami blinked, blind-sided by his suggestion. While she was still trying to determine if she had heard correctly, her brain was already evaluating the feasibility. She knew that spells for controlling individuals existed in her library. Theoretically, they could be combined with sympathetic magic to spread-No, bad brain! This wasn't an interesting puzzle that needed solving! She would already have gotten rid of those dark tomes if she could be sure she would never need to counter their contents!

Jadeite made a contemplative noise, attracting her attention.

To her great disappointment, he seemed to be seriously considering Torian's evil idea, looking neither horrified nor even disturbed.

Cathy, on the other hand, was glaring at the back of the warlock's head, and Snyder just closed his eyes, his mouth curving downwards in disgust.

Tiger wasn't paying any attention to the dark magician. Instead, she was throwing worried glances in Ami's direction.

"D-did I make a mistake, your Imperial Majesty?" Torian asked, having noticed that something was amiss.

Ami finally became aware that the room had taken on a faint reddish hue. Her eyes must have been burning a bright red from her quiet anger.

Puzzled about what had upset her, the warlock defaulted to grovelling. "My Empress, I didn't mean to offend you by suggesting that your own personal magic would be insufficient for-"

"Oh, just be quiet and let her think," Tiger interrupted him.

Ami forcibly reminded herself that he was simply doing his job, and doing it well. His advice was horrifying, but it would work perfectly fine for someone evil enough to apply it. She needed to keep in mind that, with a few exceptions, she only had terrible people working for her. Terrible people who would desert her if they found out she wasn't even worse than them.

She coughed into her hand and mumbled "Not you. Goblins."

The warlock eagerly accepted the lie, happy that someone else was the target of her ire. "Ah, of course. What did they do?"

"That's not important right now," Ami said. "I'll make some preparations so we will be ready to use the airship plan when it becomes necessary."

"Don't you have to sabotage the railway first?" Tiger asked, looking at her with surprise.

Ami shook her head. "I want to wait until the last moment, when the first train with soldiers leaves. Hopefully, that will force the dwarfs to lose some extra time as they re-evaluate the situation."

"Are you sure you will spot them in time?"

"I have an imp watching traffic from the city," she answered. Her attention briefly flickered to the creature in question, who was covered in soot to blend in with the black cave moss.

The imp was picking her nose and looked incredibly bored.

Cringing at the sight, Ami elaborated. "She'll teleport back to me when a train leaves the city. At that point, I'll make the tunnel cave in just in front of the station and make it unusable."

Tiger nodded in comprehension.

She turned to Torian. "I want the warlocks to locate the enemy logistics tail. The dwarfs won't want to come here without food." Targeting things over people also had the advantage of making her feel less guilty. Of course, she couldn't be sure about unintended consequences. Armies on the move tended to take the supplies they needed from the surrounding villages, no matter whether or not the inhabitants could spare them.

The chief warlock bowed. "Of course, your Majesty."

"I would also like it if the enemy soldiers never got their marching orders. Cathy, I need you assemble a few teams with soldiers who are well-suited for surgical strikes against the enemy commanders."

"The nobles and marshal, you mean?" the swordswoman asked, uncrossing her arms. "I'll see what I can do. There will be plenty of other nobles and soldiers ready to move up the command chain, though."

Ami thought for a moment. "It should be enough if incompetents end up in the open positions," she said. Feudal systems weren't exactly famous for merit-based promotions.

"How do we figure out which ones are incompetent?" Cathy asked.

"Most soldiers will be all too happy to badmouth their superiors," Jadeite said with a voice that spoke of experience. "The prisoners might know something."

Ami nodded. "Tiger, since the dwarfs seem to respect you, could you talk to them after they had some time to sleep and recover?"

"All right," her adopted sister agreed with a shrug.

"Thank you. Snyder, you-"

The red-haired acolyte looked at her, barely able to keep his eyes open.

"- you best go to bed and recover too," she finished. None of the healer's patients remained in critical condition. Since Jadeite already had a task, it was time to bring this meeting to a close. "If there are no more questions or comments, then I'd like for everyone to get started with the preparations."

"Wait," Cathy held up her hand. "How are you going to prevent the army already besieging us from attacking the moment we move out?"

The dwarfs would not attack if there was no chance for victory. At least, Ami hoped that they weren't fanatical enough to sacrifice their lives for no appreciable gain. A dungeon flush with defenders would be too difficult a target, and thus, she needed to import some of the orcs that lived in the mountains.

"Jered, I'll be arriving in a moment," she alerted her envoy through her communication spell.

The wavy-haired man rose from the pillow he was sitting on and moved to the wall of his dome-shaped tent. With his open palm, he gestured at the free space he had left, giving the go-ahead for her to teleport in.

She appeared, caught a brief glance of the glass lamp hanging from the ceiling while rotating in mid-air, and skilfully landed feet-first on the woven mats that covered the ground.

"Welcome, Mercury."

"Hello, Jered," she greeted him with a smile.

Her fluttering cloak finished its own descent, draping itself over her head and ruining an otherwise flawless landing.

With an impatient wave of her hand, she brushed the offending cloth out of her face. "Yet another drawback of imp teleportation," she muttered under her breath.

Jered looked her up and down. "You don't look like an imp to me."

Ami shuffled her feet under his inspection. "Glamoured ice golem," she explained.

"Oh, so that's why you are covered in water droplets," Jered said, his gaze pointed straight at her chest. "Nice dress, by the way."

The black garment with golden decorations resembled her Keeper uniform and gathered tiny droplets as if it was ice-cold. Keeping in theme with its wet appearance, it clung to her skin.

Blushing, Ami pulled her cloak shut tight. "No, that's actually the corruption's fault," she explained with a grimace. "The fabric is neither cold nor wet."

It also looked as if it had been chewed on by a swarm of artistically-inclined moths, but much to Ami's relief, the holes had avoided embarrassing locations. They even formed a decorative snowflake

pattern.

She had bought such restraint for the price of picking a garment that had little spare fabric to begin with. Since she was used to her senshi uniform, the shortness of the dress didn't bother her, but it also left her back and shoulders uncovered. She felt almost as if she was only wearing a thin towel she had wrapped around herself.

"Tough. I didn't really have any problems with corruption outside of your dungeon," Jered said, raising an eyebrow.

"*You* don't count as a piece of my territory," Ami pointed out. She looked down at herself. "I just hope this won't offend the orc dignitaries."

The wavy-haired man snorted. "Dignitaries, hah. You will be fine. In fact, they don't have anything better than furs and leathers. The worst you'll have to worry about is them wondering why you aren't dressing warmer," he added with a grin.

Ami looked at the clothes that hung from one of the tent's curved bone supports. Some of them were Jered's greenish shirts, and trousers, but she also spotted several fur studded mantles she didn't remember him owning.

"Yeah, it gets cold here at times," Jered said, following her gaze. "Especially when riding." He sighed. "The nomad lifestyle isn't for me."

"The orcs were hard to track down, then?" Ami asked.

Jered grimaced. "Not exactly. Your communication spell can still be used as the lure it was originally meant to be, and it works fine on orcs. The main difficulty was the number of different tribes. They travel around a lot, they don't have fixed routes, they can't stand each other, and they tend to greet foreigners by ambushing them," he listed.

"Ambushes?" Ami asked, her eyes widening. She quickly checked Jered for injuries. "Is everyone all right?"

"Don't worry, not a scratch," he said. "For some reason, they were

reluctant to actually go through with an attack on a group of big guys in black armour flying an obvious Keeper banner. I didn't even have to rely on your shield amulets despite a few tense standoffs."

"I'm glad you are unharmed," she said.

"My backside doesn't feel unharmed," replied, feigning a wince as he patted his trousers. "Damn clops."

"Clops?"

"Some kind riding lizard critter. Big as a cow, feathers, long tail- oh, I'll just show you." He motioned for her to follow him, brushed aside both curtains blocking the tent's entrance, and stepped into the sunlight.

Ami joined him, enjoying the warmth of the sun on her fake skin. It had been too long since she had been outside in her own body, or at least something closely resembling it.

Her first glimpse of the orcish camp showed her perhaps a dozen tents like the one behind her, spread out inside a narrow valley over an area the size of a village. Groups of two to five orcs were outside, cooking meat on open fires or chatting with each other.

She could also see a few of the animals Jered had mentioned, tied to poles next to each tent. They reminded her of snake-faced llamas with long, lizard-like tails. Covered in a shaggy brown coat made of feathers, the beasts were scraping moss off rocks with their tongues. In her opinion, their wide backs didn't look particularly comfortable.

Someone gasped to her left. "Your Majesty!"

Surprised, she turned and heard two clangs as armoured knees struck the ground.

A duo of guards in black plate armour knelt before her, flanking the entrance of Jered's tent. Even kneeling,the two were only a head shorter than her.

Through the open visor of the left guard's helmet, a hint of rapidly

paling pink skin was visible. It was the fleshy pink of a human face, not the intense bubble gum colour of orcish skin. "E-empress! I was not aware that y-you would be visiting us," the man stuttered, his head bowed.

She inclined her head in an awkward bow, having no idea how to respond to people spontaneously genuflecting to her. She could feel a minion bond from both the human and his orcish companion, so at least she didn't need to wonder about the cause of their reverence even if she couldn't remember their faces.

"At ease, both of you," Jered said before Ami's silence could be misinterpreted. "Her Majesty arrived on short notice. Dorn, go inform the others about her arrival. Gerno, call together the tribesmen and tell them that the Empress is here to take over the negotiations."

"Of course, master Jered!" both chorused. They saluted and left; the human moved towards a nearby tent while the orcish guard approached a big drum.

The first drumbeats echoed through the valley and caught the attention of the orcs outside. They turned to stare in Ami's direction even as more of the pink-skinned creatures appeared from their tents.

Jered leaned closer to her and said in a low voice "To be honest, I'm relieved I can turn this headache over to you. I've lost count of how many times I wanted to beat some sense into these so-called diplomats."

Ami turned sharply to look at him, her brow furrowed in worry. "They don't want to join us?" she asked in a small voice, well aware that talking to people wasn't one of her strong points. She didn't have anything that made her more convincing than him, aside perhaps from being scarier.

"I mentioned before that the tribes don't get along with each other, right? To put it succinctly, they are all behaving like little children who want the biggest piece of a cake. Or don't want the others to get any cake. Or refuse to eat their cake in the presence of the others. Or- well, you get the picture."

The meeting with the orcish representatives was taking place outside, around a crude table crafted from a single fallen tree. Its trunk had been split lengthwise and placed on the ground with the flat side up, providing a flat surface for placing various earthen plates and mugs.

In deference to Ami's rank, the orcs had reserved one entire side of the table for her and her staff, while the eleven representatives from the tribes sat together on the other side. They had also seated her on the largest pile of pillows present on the meadow and served her the best piece of meat from the boar roasting on a spit nearby.

So far, she hadn't dared verify that claim about the liver resting on the plate before her. Not only was her knife currently stuck to some resin still seeping from the table's wood, but the piece of organ meat did not look appetising at all. Its intense smell overpowered all the more pleasant aromas in the area, but at least, it made it easy for her to maintain an expression that matched her current disgust at the state of the negotiations.

"... never work together with that Bear Fang scum!" Lercis, an orc who had decorated his muscular arms with ash-based paint, thrust his hand demonstratively at his right neighbour.

Said neighbour flinched back from the fork in Lercis's hand, his face turning an angry purple as he prepared to shout something back. "I don't have to take this from-"

Ami was growing more and more frustrated with the proceedings. Two hours wasted with insults, pointless squabbling, and one case of arson. Jered had been spot on when he had compared the orcs to bickering children. With a sudden jerk of her head, she looked up from her plate. "Enough! Stop it already, all of you!" she said in a raised voice.

The orcs along the table fell silent and looked at her, their muscles tensing as they went very still.

Only one of them wasn't bothered by her outburst and raised an

eyebrow at her. Glowing coals covered his armour like scales, surrounding him with hazy smoke trails.

"Yes, that includes you, Guldor," she said, fixing him with her stare. He was a priest of some dark god, so she was inclined to dislike him by default. His actions so far hadn't raised his opinion of him, either "Especially you. If you set anyone else on fire, I'll remove you from this table myself."

The orc with his shaved head looked away first.

Now that she had silence and their attention, she felt awkward under their stares. Using her annoyance to keep her natural shyness at bay, she pressed on. "The way you are bargaining does not make sense," she continued.

"We are negotiating in the best interests of our tribes," an excessively wrinkly orc protested. Perhaps Irgar was so old that he wasn't as attached to his continued survival as the others.

Ami shook her head. "No, you are not," she voiced a suspicion that had been building for some time. "None of you want to provide me with warriors unless the other tribes do too, since doing so would shift the balance of power against you."

"Exactly!" Irgar confirmed, and the others nodded along with him.

"And then each of you keeps bargaining for special advantages over the others," Ami said in the same tone of voice.

"Which is perfectly reasonable," Lercir said, apparently encouraged by her calm summary.

"Advantages which are completely insignificant in comparison to the ridiculously generous offers I have already made," she continued her train of thought.

"No kidding," Jered commented in her head, his exasperation clearly audible even through the distortion from the communication spell.

"Oh, I'll be happy to ask for more if you insist," Guldor said in a mocking tone.

The orc sitting closest to him coughed violently and rolled backwards off his pillow. Another orc threw himself sideways from his seat, putting more distance between himself and the dark priest.

Ami ignored the interjection. "Offers I only made because I want warriors quickly, and which will only be available for a limited time. You stand much more to lose from not accepting them than you stand to gain from any individual advantages you could negotiate. Also, I am well aware that there are no chieftains here to talk to me."

"Ah, well, they don't really want to risk getting mind-controlled into a decision," one of the less outstanding negotiators said meekly. "No offence intended."

He had a point there, Ami secretly admitted. Still, she chose to continue with her conclusion. "Granted, but when I look at the whole picture, I am getting the feeling that you are simply stalling because you do not want to work for me." She fell silent, observing their reaction to her statement while hoping she was wrong.

A few of the negotiators ducked their heads as if hoping to make themselves smaller targets while others started sweating. Half of them began stammering protests in uncertain voices, making it hard to understand any of them.

"T- that's-"

"But-"

"How are we-"

"There's a good expl-"

Unfortunately, Ami couldn't tell from their terrified reaction whether they were afraid because she had hit the nail on the head or because they expected her to punish them for the perceived slight. Quickly, she raised her hands as if to ward off their hasty explanations. "Calm down! I won't be offended by anyone refusing to work for me!" She would be extremely worried about being unable to gather enough troops instead, but there was no need to tell them that.

The orcs fell quiet at her words, a few of them looking surprised.

"I will, however, be offended by people wasting my time. Also, if I'm right, I want to know the reason for your reluctance," Ami continued, trying to put as much steel into her voice as she could manage.

The diplomats looked at each other quietly, not meeting her eyes.

"Your gold won't be of any use to us if we are dead," Irgar broke the silence. Beads of perspiration gleamed in the wrinkles of his forehead. "I shall be frank. Keepers who try to take on the dwarfs don't last long. You," he stared directly into Ami's eyes "Have yet to prove that you can do better!"

His closest neighbours backed away from him discretely. When a few seconds passed without something violent and painful happening to him, some of them started looking a little disappointed.

Emboldened by the lack of smiting, the elder orc continued. "None of the Keepers who have tried invading these lands have held out for longer than two weeks," he elaborated. "Most didn't even last a single one."

"Bartholomeus," Guldor objected from the back.

The orc glared at him over his shoulder. "Bartholomeus' infiltration only got as far as it did because he distracted the dwarfs by feeding his subordinate Keepers into the meat grinder."

"Bartholomeus?" Ami mentally asked Jered, doing her best to keep her face neutral.

"The Keeper responsible for the dwarven civil war about a decade ago," he answered, his voice distorted by the transmission spell.*"Got killed by Baron Leopold, and good riddance."*

Ami digested the new information with a sinking feeling. The Keepers defeated in the first week had probably lost to the forces of a local count and his barons; the same kind of attack she had already fended off successfully. This was valuable information, since it gave her a rough estimate of when to expect the second attack.

"But the dark empress has already been discovered," Irgar pointed out. "Distracting the dwarfs is no longer possible for her."

"Unless she's the distraction," the dark priest speculated while looking at Ami.

"Probing question about my strategy aside," she said, "the reason you don't want to join me is because you expect me to lose?"

"No disrespect intended, Empress," Lercir said, bowing his head. "You do have quite the reputation for resourcefulness, but we have seen dungeon after dungeon smashed into ruins by those hairy midgets."

"It's not like we don't want to fight them, but even Keeper Mukrezar has never tried to invade their lands," someone whined.

"And there is nothing that could convince you to fight on my side?" Ami said, hoping she didn't sound too desperate there.

Guldor smirked. "Sure there is. You could simply prove that you can handle the dwarfs," he said. "Survive. Seize a city or something. Turn one of their armies into cinders. That kind of thing."

So she would get her troops when she no longer needed them, Ami thought to herself. According to what Torian had said earlier, conquering a city was something that might happen in the near future, *if* she somehow managed to deal with the problem of the army that was surrounding her dungeon. "Do you agree with him?" Ami asked the others for confirmation.

The white-haired and knobby-nosed heads along the table nodded, some more enthusiastically than others.

"Yes, in principle," Irgar said. "If you showed us that you are strong enough to beat the dwarfs, then our only objection to joining you would be gone."

"Which would be easier with you on my side," she tried again.

"Oh, we will be assisting you indirectly," Lercir said.

Intrigued, she asked. "How so?"

"With the enemy troops away to focus on you, we'll have ample opportunities to raid the countryside. They'll have to divert some of their soldiers for the futile task of hunting us down," he said matter-of-factly.

"What? No!" Ami could already see burning villages and dead townspeople in her mind's eye, and it would all be her fault.

Lercir rocked back. "No?" he squeaked, his pinprick-sized pupils reflecting the red glow of her eyes.

"Those are my future lands you will be raiding! I need them intact!" she said, blurting out the first somewhat reasonable justification that entered her mind.

"My, you very confident Empress," Guldor said, chuckling.

The orcs around him would have had to climb onto their neighbours' laps to back away any further.

"Well," Irgar said quickly, attempting to defuse the situation. "We could offer you some of the loot as tribute if-"

"I don't want loot!" Ami interrupted him. "I want you to leave the people alone so they will still be around to work the land for me when I have conquered this realm." There. Hopefully, that sounded enough like a reason an evil Keeper would have to protect civilians.

"You think the dwarfs will serve you?" Lercis said, sounding flabbergasted. "That is, I mean, I'm not doubting you, obviously," he backtracked quickly.

The other orcs were whispering quietly to each other, sounding both dubious and intractable.

"...think she's serious?"

"...won't be around for long anyway..."

She needed discourage them from their raids, which would be hard

if they didn't believe she would be able to back up her threats. *"Jered, do you have any idea?"* she communicated mentally.

"Raiding is part of their way of life, " he answered quickly. *"Words won't get them to stop."*

Ami swallowed. That wasn't what she wanted to hear. Perhaps she could limit the damage? "Do you understand? Wealth is created by people. Carry off whatever you like, but don't kill the people so they will keep producing wealth. It's simply good business sense."

"Well, yes," Guldor agreed. "It would be wasteful to exterminate any but the useless and decrepit."

Ami clenched her fists in anger as she imagined just what and whom he was talking about. She had to leave before she lost her temper and did something to that disgusting villain, jeopardising any future help she might get from the orcs as well as risking to anger another dark god. "It's good we understand each other," she said, struggling to prevent the words from coming out as a snarl.

Some of her hosts flinched when she stood abruptly.

"Thank you for your hospitality," she said as she inclined her head the minimal amount required by politeness. "Something has come up that I must deal with. Jered, have the troops prepare to leave. I'll come pick you up shortly."

"Of course." He said, glancing over at the orcs for their reactions.

If anything, they seemed relieved about the planned departure.

"Well, so much for the negotiations," Jered commented secretly. *"Can't say I'm sad about leaving, but it's a pity we won't get any new troops."*

Ami nodded silently, feeling bitter disappointment now that her anger was abating. Without the support of the tribes, she would need to try one of her riskier ideas.

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Recruiting Trouble

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Low-hanging clouds wafted past the massive tower that had appeared on the peak of Whitemountain. Together with the constant drizzle, they made it hard to identify the details of the distant structure, such as the crenellations topping the many balconies. The entire building resembled a step pyramid that had been stretched until it pointed into the sky like an accusing finger.

Iton lowered his telescope and automatically started cleaning its lens as he retreated from the arrow slit. "That thing gives me the creeps," his whisper echoed through the cave, addressed to the other dwarf within the watch post. "When did she even build it?"

"It was just suddenly there after a big cloud passed," Datan answered with a shrug. He had the tanned look of someone who spent a lot of time outside. "Had to look twice to make sure I wasn't imagining things."

"I wonder what she's planning. What good does a fortress do her all the way up there? She's underground; we aren't going to make a detour just to besiege it." Having wiped the raindrops off his telescope to his satisfaction, he approached the narrow window to the outside again.

"Hell if I know what she needs it for. Though..."

"You have an idea?" Iton asked as he tried to bring the dark structure into better focus.

"Nah, it's probably nothing. Doesn't make sense," his fellow scout said. "It was a silly idea."

"Humour me. I could use a good laugh," Iton insisted.

"It's not exactly a funny thought," Datan said with a sigh. "All right. Do you see that staircase spiralling its way up there on the outside

of the building?"

He zoomed in on one of the corners of the building, where rainwater fountained out of a drain in the wall. He could see some wide steps rounding the corner there, where the wall serving as their railing didn't hide them. "Hmm, yeah, I see it. What about it?"

"Well, together with the general shape of the building, it kind of reminds me of the death god's ziggurats."

"What? Yeah, you were right. That's not funny at all. I hope that's not really some kind of dark temple." With jerky motions, Iton swept his telescope left and right. "At least I don't see any- wait, what the- get over here and look at this!"

"Did you *actually* spot some walking dead?" Datan asked, a hint of nervousness in his voice as he approached.

"No, look up there, at the sky above the tower!"

A large, vaguely fish-shaped object descended through the storm clouds, its cylindrical hull only a shade lighter than the darkness above. Taut chains with links as thick as fists anchored the vessel to the top of the looming building.

"That- nothing that big should be able to fly!" Datan exclaimed.

"Tell that to that thing," Iton grumbled. "What the hell *is* it? Some kind of weird dragon?"

"I have heard rumours that Keeper Mercury has some flying transports. Could be one of those," Datan replied.

The vessel continued its descent, shaking in the wind. Large winches reeled it in closer as they spooled up the chains. Within a few minutes, its cabin touched down on the tower's top floor.

A hatch in the cabins side opened, disgorging indistinct figures. They spread out until most of them were hidden by the building's walls, but some remained visible over the crenellations.

"Filthy orcs!" Datan exclaimed. "I'd recognise those hunched-over

silhouettes anywhere!"

"Oh crap, she wasn't supposed to get reinforcements past us! We need to warn Count Ornish at once!"

"You write the message, I prepare the dog," Datan offered. A hunter in civilian life, he was used to working with trained animals. He whistled once and started rummaging around in his backpack.

Loud barks answered his call, approaching rapidly. A grey terrier, not much bigger than a cat, emerged from the opening leading deeper into the mountain. The floppy-eared animal dashed straight towards Datan, tail swishing.

"That's a good dog," he said as he patted the animal on the head. "Sit. Good boy."

"A flying object docked at the new tower, bypassing our siege line. Delivered an unknown number and type of soldiers. Orcs identified among them," Iton read the message he had composed out loud. "Do you think that's enough?"

"It's succinct and accurate," the other dwarf answered while affixing a small barrel to the dog's collar. "The Count will have his wizards take a closer look, anyway."

"I suppose so. Here." He handed over the message to Datan, ignoring the terrier's growling as he approached.

The hunter quickly slipped the rolled-up note into the empty container hanging from his dog's neck and screwed it shut. "Good. Now go find Dolon. Understand me? Go to Dolon!"

With a happy woof, the animal darted away, its claws clicking on the rock floor.

"Do you think the Count will be able to stop those reinforcements?" Iton asked as he resumed watching the tower.

"Maybe if he figures out where the ships pick them up," Datan answered. "If not, we'll have to pray that the elves arrive soon."

Tiger was in her room when her wristband flashed a warning. Someone was scrying on her.

Her mother perhaps? For a split second, she wished she was wearing something more substantial. Surprised, she wondered why she was feeling that way. Her lack of shyness was something she cherished. It was one of the few personality traits entirely her own, something she could be sure she hadn't inherited from Ami. Mum probably wouldn't approve of her showing that much skin in public, though.

Satisfied that she had solved the mystery, she arrived at her desk and removed a crystal ball from her drawer. The scrying alarm *usually* meant that someone from her home world was trying to contact her, but it wasn't always the case. Sometimes, she spotted unknown and usually bearded individuals when she checked.

The orb in her hand quickly tracked the person scrying on her. The familiar girl with long black hair was definitely no wizard, dwarf, or enemy Keeper.

"Mars! Hi!" Tiger said with a smile, happy to see the sailor senshi's face. She immediately recognised Rei's room at the Hikawa shrine, having seen it several times while teaching the other girls flight spells.

"Hello, Tiger," Mars greeted her. She wasn't alone.

Another face pushed itself into the view from the side. Sailor Jupiter, kneeling next to the red-skirted sailor senshi at the low table, smiled and waved her hand. "Hello!" the taller girl greeted.

"Hi," Tiger answered, her own smile growing wider. Makoto had a special place in her heart. Of the senshi, she was the only one that Ami had never met in person. In fact, Tiger was pretty sure that she had interacted more with the brunette than her sister, even if it was only by talking through the crystal ball.

It was pretty nice to have at least one friendly relationship that she had built all by herself. One she could be sure hadn't started out as

pity over her being a partial memory-clone of Ami.

She tried to push those thoughts aside. Her friendship with Usagi, Rei, and Luna was a good thing, even if she wondered about its origins when she was in a thinking mood.

She had been thinking way too much for her tastes since the battle.

"Sailor Moon was supposed to be here too," Mars said apologetically, "but she managed to get detention. Again." She wasn't actually rolling her eyes as she explained Usagi's absence, but her tone indicated that it was a close thing.

"She'll probably arrive later," Sailor Jupiter said quickly. "But, is everything all right over there?" She asked looking straight at Tiger and doing a poor job at hiding her worry.

Apparently, her face had been betraying some of her less than pleasant thoughts. "I'm fine, just thinking about some unpleasant things," she said. "We had a lot of trouble earlier. The dwarfs attacked, we had to beat them back, and, well, there were losses on both sides," she said, her shoulders slumping.

"Oh no," Mars said, lowering her eyes. "I hope you didn't lose anyone important to you."

Jupiter's eyes went wide, and she gasped. "That's horrible! Are you hurt? What happened? How is Ami?" She leaned forward, her face filling out the crystal ball as she tried to inspect Tiger for injuries.

"I'm fine, I was helping out in the infirmary, not fighting at the front lines," Tiger assured them, feeling a little overwhelmed by the deluge of questions. "Ami wasn't in any danger either because she coordinated the battle from her command centre." She scratched her head. "And, uh, I didn't really know any of the minions who died on our side."

The ghost of a smile flitted over Jupiter's face. "That's a relief. Not exactly good, but at least you aren't grieving."

"Well, I think Ami is taking the deaths pretty hard, even though she did everything she could to avoid them and it's the dwarfs' own fault

for attacking us," Tiger admitted.

"Do you think she needs someone to talk about it?" Mars asked, sounding concerned.

Tiger shrugged. "She's already back to planning and travelling around working on stuff. If you contacted her now, you'd probably interrupt her during something important."

"Oh." Mars looked disappointed. "Are you sure she isn't just keeping herself busy so she doesn't have to think about the deaths?"

"Yes, we aren't out of danger yet and she can't waste time," she answered with conviction. She paused as she reconsidered. Just because Ami really needed to be busy right now didn't mean she wasn't using her work as a convenient distraction. Huh. "I suppose she *could* be doing what you said, but there really is a lot of work she can't put off until later."

"Well, tell her to contact us as soon as possible, okay?" Mars said.

"Sure."

"So, you were helping people in the infirmary?" Jupiter asked. "Are you interested in becoming a doctor too?"

Tiger's stomach churned at the memories. "Not any more," she admitted, suppressing a shudder at the thought of having to bear the screams of the wounded and the blood and the stench for hours each day. Even if her adopted mother would have been proud of her. "I learned that it's not a job for me. I- I don't understand why Ami wants to subject herself to something like that all the time."

"Helping people can be very satisfying," Jupiter said.

Tiger pondered this. "Maybe if those people don't want you dead," she allowed after a moment.

Jupiter's face fell, and she visibly lacked a good answer.

Mars broke the awkward silence. "Well, most of a doctor's work isn't about dealing with the aftermath of a battle. Perhaps you could give

it a try again when things are more peaceful."

"Perhaps," Tiger said and sighed. "This entire situation with the dwarfs is so annoying. I wish I could do something about it. All this sitting around and hoping that Ami will fix things is so frustrating!"

"I know the feeling," Jupiter said, nodding. "Er, not waiting for Mercury in particular, of course, but wanting to go out there and stopping the evildoers." She scratched the back of her head. "Though I guess the dwarfs aren't really evildoers."

"They are ruthless enough," Tiger answered. "You know what gets me most?" she asked in a quiet voice. "I think I could do it. Drive them off, I mean."

Both other girls leaned in closer, their eyes large.

"Really? How?" Jupiter asked.

"But there's some kind of problem with your idea, right?" Mars asked, showing more insight than her taller friend.

Tiger looked down. "Ami wouldn't like it. At all," she admitted. "I, I could possess her and use her powers to wipe out enough of the dwarfs that the rest run for their lives."

Mars' and Jupiter's eyes were still wide, but now their faces looked appalled.

"It could work! I mean, she would have to be unconscious and normally the dungeon heart wouldn't let me, but since it's for her own good it should make an exception!" she pressed on before she lost her courage, the words spilling out of her.

"No! Don't do that!" Jupiter said, waving her hands frantically as if she had to stop Tiger from leaving and implementing her plan right this moment.

"That's a terrible idea!" Mars agreed, shaking her head. She narrowed her eyes at the crystal ball. "There are so many things wrong with it, I don't even know where to start!"

"But it would keep us safe and most of the dwarfs too and Mum wouldn't have to worry and Ami wouldn't be responsible so she wouldn't need to blame herself!" Tiger protested.

"You can't kill innocent people! Do you think your Mum wants you to kill innocent people?" Jupiter asked, wringing her hands.

Tiger flinched. She didn't want to do anything that would make her mother see her any less as her real daughter. Being not even human, she already had a poor start. She hated that she cared so much about this, those weren't even her own memories! "T-they aren't really innocent if they want to attack us," she objected weakly.

"They think you invaded them first," Mars said. "And while Ami might not blame herself," she sounded rather dubious about that, "she would rightly blame you!"

"I know. I expect it, but she's smart enough that she will eventually realise that there weren't any better options."

Mars' violet eyes stared straight into Tiger's. "I don't believe that, but let's assume that's true. What about trust, then? Do you really want to lose her trust?"

She swallowed. No, she really didn't, which was more of a reason for her to not go through with her idea than the possible disapproval of those she didn't care about.

Jupiter didn't even try to formulate a reasoned argument and went straight for begging. "Please, please don't try to do this."

"A-all right." Tiger hung her head in defeat. "I'll trust Ami to solve this her way."

"Thank you," Mars said, relief chasing her frown away.

"Actually, what *is* she doing?" Jupiter asked.

"Well, since we currently have some trouble recruiting more soldiers, she is planning to deceive the dwarfs," Tiger gladly accepted the change of topic. "We pretend to have more troops than we really do so they are too scared to attack."

"Makes sense," Mars said, nodding once.

"How is she doing that?" Jupiter wanted to know.

"She built this huuuge tower on top of the mountain," Tiger said, raising her arms over her head and putting her fingers together like a roof. "You have to take a look later, it's really impressive since it's meant to be impossible to miss. She's using it as an airport."

"Airport?" Jupiter asked, a hint of distaste flickering over her face.

"For airships. She sends them out to some remote mountains with some inflatable orc dolls-"

"Inflatable orc dolls," Mars repeated, a disbelieving expression on her face. From her deadpan tone of voice, it was clear she was imagining some kind of humanoid pink balloon.

"Jadeite enhanced them with a little glamour," Tiger elaborated. "They look pretty realistic from afar and can twitch a little. Anyway, the airship comes back with what looks like a load full of orcs. It lands, some real orcs enter through a secret hatch below and pretend to disembark, and the dwarfs think we have more troops than we really do."

"Is it working?" Jupiter asked, sounding interested. "It sounds as if a lot could go wrong."

Tiger shrugged. "Who knows? The dwarfs have been hiding in their fortifications since the attack. Anyway, this isn't just to deceive them. It's also because Jadeite is stuck here in the dungeon."

Both senshi blinked with puzzled looks on their faces.

"He can't accompany the airships and guide them with magic, so they need crews who know what they are doing. It's training," she explained.

"Ohhh."

"Why didn't you just say that first?" Mars asked, frowning briefly.

"Anyway, Ami hasn't entirely given up on recruiting yet," Tiger continued. "That's the part of her plan I don't like at all."

The swimming ritual chamber didn't show that it had been hurriedly carved out of a block of frozen sea water. It formed a spherical bubble within the ice, serving as the frame for a huge gyroscope. In the centre of the gimbal, just above the huge rotor, rested the platform that the mechanism was designed to stabilise. Intricate wards covered the outer region of its surface, interspersed with sapphires intended to boost any spells cast within.

Ami stood on the disc-shaped surface, double-checking her rushed handiwork for flaws she might have missed.

Dimmed sunlight that fell through the part of the dome above the surface assisted her in her task, but the shifting gimbal rings cast soft shadows onto her.

The room grew even darker when a serpentine tentacle as thick as her torso rose from the ocean and loomed over the vessel. Water fountained as the tower of pale flesh hammered down on the dome.

Ami flinched instinctively away from the blow, even though she knew that there was a thick barrier between herself and the descending mass.

To her side, Torian let out a high-pitched, unmanly squeal.

The ceiling shook from the tentacle's impact and groaned under the pressure. Pushed downwards, the entire vessel dipped deeper into the water.

She stumbled as the ground dropped underneath her feet, put off-balance by the way the room tilted sideways around the platform.

Torian threw himself against the large vertical pipe shielding the gyroscope's spin axle, wrapping his arms around it to remain upright.

Ami cast a worried glance at him even as she compensated for the bobbing motion by taking a wider-legged stance. To her relief, he seemed to be overreacting. After all, the platform he shared with her

remained completely horizontal, courtesy of the gyroscope.

"I-is this part of y-your plan, your Majesty?" the warlock stuttered, not taking his eyes off the ceiling. They bulged when a second tentacle joined the first, hand-sized suckers flattening themselves against the ice.

Muscles pulsed under tattered, black-veined skin, and the sea water rushed to cover the dome as the squid pulled more of it under the surface.

"I was hoping for smaller targets," she admitted, her gaze transfixed on the zombie squid. She was pretty sure that the groping tentacles weren't strong enough to crack the dome, but she didn't feel quite so confident about the animal's beak.

"I'm getting seasick," Torian complained as he clutched the pipe like a limpet. "Please, can't you remove that thing somehow?"

"Well, I-"

Splashes of black liquid splattered onto the dome, blotting out another patch of the sky.

For a moment, Ami thought it was ink, but then she saw that the first tentacle had gone limp.

Like an avalanche, the maggot-coloured appendage slid downwards, waves fountaining around it as it slid underwater. Tar-like, rotten blood continued spilling from the amputated stump.

A reddish blur shot towards the other limb wrapped around the vessel. Rabixtrel brought his scythe down in a flash, severing the tentacle. With steam billowing around his pumping hooves, he raced toward the bulk of his enemy. He jumped, barrelling straight through a small wave to hit the animal horns-first.

Ami blinked as she stared at the hoof prints melted into the ice in her reaper's wake. "Never mind. It won't be a problem for much longer."

She had no idea how her horned reaper had managed to remain on the rolling vessel's surface, but she had no doubt that he would

swiftly dispatch the enemy.

"I- I see." Torian seemed a little calmer without the aquatic monster rocking the ship. At least he had finally let go of the pipe.

Seeing the spin axle reminded Ami to keep the gyroscope's rotor turning. A few cranks with her keeper hand, and she could hear the spinning noise grow higher-pitched as the rotor increased its speed. Good. It wouldn't do for the platform to tip over at a critical moment. Or at all.

"Haven't we attracted sufficient attention yet?" the warlock asked, his nervous gaze darting across the ocean's surface. "They are pushing us away from the coast!"

She glanced in the direction he indicated.

The dune-like clouds of poisoned dust drifting across the beaches of the Avatar Islands looked smaller than they had before.

Outside, the water was darkening with the sheer amount of zombies that were flocking towards the vessel. The largest of them was a young whale with only the ribcage remaining of its chest cavity. Despite its size, it was still only slightly larger than the chunks of giant squid currently sinking to the bottom of the ocean.

It was probably for the best that Torian didn't have Keeper sight. He was already nervous enough. While the animated corpses assembled here represented only a small fraction of those that had been at the high temple of Crowned Death, there were still enough to threaten any conventional fleet.

"Yes, I believe there are more than enough targets," Ami confirmed.

"Oh. Great," the warlock muttered with little conviction. He had good reason to be afraid. His undead control spell must have put him quite high on the list of people whom the death god disapproved of.

Ami hoped that Crowned Death wasn't personally paying attention right now. She also wished she knew how much influence and oversight the dark god had over existing undead. If it went beyond what she estimated, her entire plan was doomed to failure from the

start. Still, the fact that the vampires back in her dungeon hadn't betrayed her yet was good sign. Trying to keep her voice calm and confident, she asked "Are you ready to cast the spell?"

"Yes, I believe so, your Majesty." His gaze moved over the outer circle of the stable platform, where intricate magical designs covered the floor. "Depending on the amount of subjects within range, you may need to provide me with additional power," he cautioned.

Ami approached and put one hand on his staff, ready to channel more of her mana into the device, should it become necessary. "All right, I'm ready."

With a nervous shudder, he glanced at the multiple shadows moving around the vessel, scratching, hammering and biting at the ice. "If I may ask, do we have a good escape route in case this doesn't work?"

"Yes, of course," Ami answered. "I thought you were confident about your modifications allowing your spell to maintain control of more than a single target?"

He gulped. "Well, the theory is sound, but the tests were on a smaller scale than this." Quieter, he added "Much smaller."

"If there's anyone who can do this, it's you. You invented the undead-control spell, after all," she said. "There's no one better than you to cast its area version." He was the greatest expert on this new ritual she had, but that wasn't the main reason she wasn't casting it herself. She wanted to be able to observe everything with her visor in case Crowned Death took notice of what they were doing.

"I believe you are selling your own talents too short, my Empress," Torian said, a hint of excitement creeping into his voice. "Well then, I suppose it is time to show these zombies who's boss." He gripped his staff in both hands, closed his eyes, and started chanting.

Ami could feel magic flow through the implement as the spell's energies built up in the air around them and concentrated in the magic circle around the edge of the platform.

The arcane inscriptions lit up briefly before discharging in a single pulse when Torian stopped chanting.

From one moment to the other, the zombies swarming around the ship went limp.

"Did it work?" she asked him.

Torian opened his eyes and slowly looked at the zombies suspended motionless in the water. "I- yes, I think so?" he said, frowning.

"That doesn't sound entirely reassuring," she said cautiously.

Her Keeper sight showed her that all zombies out to a good distance around the vessel had gone completely still, only moving from the effects of currents and gravity.

"Could you be more specific, please?"

"I'm not sure. My control feels off. Numb. It's different from the single target spell, and I feel as if I should be able to command them, but- ah, here we go."

Ami summoned her computer and started typing, switching through the vision modes of her visor. "Keep telling me what's going on so I can make sense of these readings," she instructed.

"I got some of them to move. Over there, on the hull, that big ugly crab." He pointed at large crustacean with only one scissor, which it was using to wave at them. "I'm getting more of them to follow my orders now," he continued, sounding a little more confident. "It's strange though, there's nothing in the ritual design that would account for time-delayed effects."

"I think I can see what's happening," Ami said as she stared at the readout on the screen. She had been expecting to see connections going out from Torian to all of the creatures affected by his spell, similar to the way her dungeon heart linked to her underlings.

However, only a single connection went from the warlock to the closest crab. In turn, the crab was connected to a rotten shark, said

shark was connected to a smaller fish, and so on. The zombies were lined up on the single connection like pearls on a string.

From the unconnected zombies, half-formed links reached like feelers toward the last element of the chain. Whenever one made contact, it attached itself. This prompted the remaining free-floating links to dart toward the new end of the chain.

"Your spell is giving you control of one creature after the other," she informed Torian. "I assume that the test group wasn't large enough for you to notice the effect."

"Figures that the vampires still managed to be worthless even when they were good for something," the warlock grumbled. "Hmm. I suppose this explains why it's growing gradually harder to suppress their wills."

Ami looked up with alarm. "Are you having trouble?"

Torian shook his head. "No, they are only animals, after all. It's like holding up a weight with my mind that's slowly growing heavier. Hmm, doesn't really feel like a bunch of animals struggling individually. More like a school of fish moving in unison? When did that happen?"

"It looks as if some of the control magic is getting trapped in the link, propagating back and forth between the zombies and causing them to synch up," she reported what she was seeing on her screen.

"What? Animals shouldn't be able to do that, you need a caster to-" Torian reeled as if struck. He blinked and shook his head. Frowning, he briefly inspected his hand before turning towards her and narrowing his eyes. "What is this blasphemy, Keeper?"

Ami's heart skipped a beat, and she stared at him with her mouth open. Had she heard that correctly? She shifted into a more defensive stance as her thoughts raced to figure out what was going on. His inflection had been that of a stranger. Had he somehow been possessed?

On her palmtop' screen, all of the zombies were pulsing in synch

now. More disturbingly, each and everyone had turned to look directly at her.

"Um, could you clarify?" she asked warily. The worst-case scenario - Crowned Death having somehow taken control of her chief warlock - seemed unlikely. He was looking at her as if he didn't recognise her, rather than cursing her or trying to kill her. He had called her 'Keeper', but her glowing red eyes made that obvious to anyone.

"I am talking about *this*," the warlock said, sweeping his arm towards the undead creatures surrounding the vessel.

Ami found the gesture pompous and arrogant, but that was admittedly not entirely unexpected from Torian.

"If you need an undead army, then there are easier and less unwise ways to gain one, Keeper," Torian - or whoever was possessing him - said.

"Are you trying to convert me?" Ami blurted out, unable to keep some of her surprise from seeping into her voice.

"Ambitious, controls a horned reaper, *and* quick on the uptake," the warlock said, nodding. "The great Crowned Death, Lord of the Undead and Master of Unlife, could always use more worshippers like you."

If the situation had been different, she would have found it funny. Instead, she stared with horror at Torian's face, worried about its mask-like stiffness. "Hold on," she stalled. "First, I wish to know whom I am talking to."

Obviously, attempting to seize control of a huge group of zombies had awakened something. Had it been a trap, someone noticing and intervening, or merely an unexpected side effect? She didn't know how Crowned Death animated bodies that were already dead. Perhaps he had cut up some powerful entity and was using its pieces instead of souls? Mentally connecting enough zombies might be enough to bring back part of the original being, in that case.

She really hoped she wasn't dealing with a fragment of an

Incarnation here.

"I am merely a manifestation of my Lord's power; the faint reflection of His unsurpassed glory in the vessels that serve Him," the creature moving Torian's body said.

Ami thought this sounded a little too humble for an Incarnation, but was the creature telling the truth? A bead of sweat ran down her forehead as she tried to read its stolen features. At least, she could be fairly certain that it had been created before she had come into conflict with Crowned Death, otherwise they wouldn't be having a civil conversation right now.

How could she save Torian? "I see. I am interested, but you would put me in a more amenable mood if you stopped puppeteering my warlock."

"No. Consider his loss the first part of your atonement for this transgression," the creature answered.

"Don't-"

"Are you seriously expecting forgiveness from my Lord?" the creature asked tilting its head to the side. "Still, I can see that you seem determined to insist on this point." Torian's right hand rose, a sickly glow at the tip of his index finger. "Let me make it moot."

Eyes widening, Ami slapped the digit aside with a telekinetic blow.

A thin ray of shadowy energy shot from the finger, narrowly missing the warlock's head.

Ami recognised it as a necromantic killing spell. "What are you doing?" she shouted at the possessed man. At the same time, she accessed her storage and loosened one of her stashed Shabon Spray Freezing spells at him.

The blue-tinted magic slammed into the warlock and encased him in a block of ice. She had aimed low enough that his head remained free, but everything below the neck was effectively immobilised.

"I thought that was obvious. Stopping you from wasting time on

discussing something I will not budge on while also eliminating an irritant," the death god's minion replied without a hint of regret in its voice.

In fact, he sounded smug enough that Ami was sure he had more tricks up his sleeve. She was, therefore, not surprised when a ghostly outline of black flames formed around Torian.

They didn't melt the ice, but Torian's eyes shot wide open, and he started gasping for breath.

"Stop it!" she shouted, spurred on by her visor's readout. The entity was killing Torian, sucking out his life energy and dispersing it. She still didn't know what kind of creature she was dealing with, but she had seen something like its black flame before.

When the Avatar had cleansed his mantle, a similar creature had emerged from the tainted garment, smashing through multiple layers of wards with each attack.

Unfortunately, this didn't tell her how to save Torian. The Avatar had purified his mantle with powerful holy magic, which was something she simply didn't have access to.

According to her visor, Torian was running out of time. He would not survive the next few seconds if she didn't intervene. She needed to act, now!

Destroy all the zombies outside in the hopes it would disrupt her enemy? She couldn't do it fast enough to save him. Knock him out? She doubted the monster would be affected. Possess him? Impossible, he counted as captured by an enemy. What did she have that could free him from the monster's grasp?

The thing chuckled coldly, obviously enjoying her increasingly desperate expression.

She looked at her visor again. The amount of magic trapped in the links between the zombies was about the same as she had channelled into Torian's staff.

Lacking any better ideas, she cast his own undead-controlling spell

on him. She didn't know if it could affect her enemy, but-

Her opponent's will crashed into her own, and she sensed a spike of gleeful satisfaction from the creature. It felt like an echo of the time Crowned Death had lured her into a trap.

Had she just made a terrible mistake? Terrified, she drew upon her reserves and pushed back against the cold, corrosive mind trying to smother her. When she had faced her opponent's master before, she had lost utterly. This time, she wasn't fighting a dark god, she reminded herself.

Nevertheless, the consequences of fighting back with anything less than her best effort were too horrible to contemplate. She concentrated, focusing enough mana that she felt as if she'd burst, and unleashed it at her enemy.

A brief flicker of surprise came from her enemy when the tsunami of power slammed into it, washing away its defences.

Seeing her opponent's weakness, she struck again, strengthening the bonds the undead-controlling spell wrapped around her target's mind. It seethed and squirmed, trying to slip from her grasp, but she refused to fall for its feints and deceptions. She had enough of an advantage in power over her opponent that she could encircle it completely and squeeze, which was exactly what she did.

Torian's head lolled to the side, and her visor showed her that he was breathing more easily now.

Her relief almost cost her when her enemy bucked to break her control.

She redoubled her efforts to crush the creature's will, succeeding little by little. After what felt like an eternity, the last of its resistance crumbled, and she greedily took the chance to take complete control.

Her opponent's presence remained chained in a corner of her mind; an angry sun radiating cold fury. Even now, keeping the monster contained required continuous effort.

Tired, she let herself sink to the floor and plucked the warlock from his ice prison. She couldn't diagnose anything physically wrong with him that wasn't related to being encased in ice, but he remained unconscious. As she had no way to deal with his current lack of life energy, she opted to deal with his lack of warmth instead.

A few brief conjurations later, the unconscious man was lying in a tub of hot water, with his head secure on a headrest so it couldn't slide below the surface.

With his safety ensured as best as she could under the circumstances, she sped up the gyroscope's rotor once more and took stock of her situation.

The inside of the icy room had brightened, red light reflecting off its curving walls. Her eyes were glowing like crimson lamps, a testament to the large amount of mana she was channelling in order to keep her opponent suppressed.

She could understand how the creature had overwhelmed Torian in moments. It was powerful, far stronger than she would have expected from something cobbled together from a horde of zombies and an experimental mind control spell.

Then again, a zombie didn't move without a source of power. If the thing was responsible for animating each and every corpse caught in the spell, then it would by necessity have access to an intimidating amount of magical strength.

She stared at the army of dead animals floating around her vessel, trying to estimate their number. Her new thrall would have the information, and with some effort, she managed to wrestle the knowledge from it.

At first, she couldn't believe the number. According to the being's senses, it was currently controlling a little more than one hundred thousand separate bodies.

She blinked. That couldn't be right, could it? Investigating more closely, she noted that the vast majority of these bodies were relatively small, about the size of her boots. The total mass was less

than that of one of the giant tentacles that had been attached to Crowned Death's high temple, then.

Satisfied that her mind-prisoner - she decided to call it a spirit, for convenience's sake - had not fed her false information somehow, she wondered how much of her original plan was salvageable.

Instead of obtaining an army of useful zombies under the control of her underlings, she had tied up much of her power in maintaining control over the collective consciousness of an undead swarm, most of whose members were utterly useless outside the water.

Simply releasing the spirit was obviously out of the question. Was the undead control spell at least working properly on it? She prodded the mass of rebellious hatred, instructing it to move a few of the zombie fishes sideways.

Outside the dome, a few of the closer corpses started moving their fins sluggishly and swimming in the indicated direction. While lying sideways in the water.

She resisted the urge to sigh and opted to concentrate on the fact that yes, she could probably work around this. Now she only needed to somehow prevent the spirit from slipping its leash the moment she got tired and needed to sleep.

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The Flopping Dead

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A tide of undead animals poured from the portal's orange glow into the empty entrance hall of Ami's dungeon. The zombies crawled, slithered, and flopped towards a square opening in the ground, proceeding down the ramp in a less than orderly fashion.

On both sides of the procession, newly-repaired reaperbots stood guard, staying as close to the walls and as far away from the wriggling, smelly carpet as possible.

Through a thick glass window high up in the ceiling, Cathy grimaced at the new arrivals "Ugh. We'll have to clean the entire room later. And all the reaperbots too. Burning everything sounds good to me."

Near the front of the smelly, shambling horde, a walrus pulled its rotting body forward. With each ungainly bound, lose skin hanging off its frame whipped around, slapping the creatures next to it. The monster pushed its way through the surrounding zombies, crunching a crab under its flipper without even noticing. Smears and flattened remains stained the formerly clean tiles in its wake. Finally, it disappeared into the hole, speeding up as it skidded down the steep ramp.

The swordswoman winced when she heard a loud, wet thumping noise from below. "Eww." She placed her hands on her hips and turned towards Ami, who was watching the proceedings through a different window. "Are you sure you are feeling all right? Not hearing voices or feeling the strange urge to, oh, convert people into your undead minions?"

Ami looked at her across the observation spot, mildly irritated by the nagging. It wasn't as if she was particularly happy about having the horrid things in her dungeon, either. "Cathy, I'm not under the influence of Crowned Death," she stated with conviction.

"Well, excuse me for feeling a little concerned when you return from

your trip with your chief warlock unconscious, a horde of zombies on your heels, and that *thing* trailing you like a shadow," Cathy said, narrowing her eyes at the spirit hovering a few steps to Ami's left.

The creature had taken on a visible form and looked like a tall, crowned skeleton made of black fire. Hundreds of chains hung off its arms and chest, forming a kind of indistinct robe that moved like smoke. The ends of the chains faded into invisibility, so it was hard to judge how far the spirit could lash out with them if it felt the inclination.

Cathy obviously didn't take any chances and stayed on the opposite site of the room.

"The spirit is completely under my control," Ami assured the blonde, "and since I want it to *stay* that way, I'm not going to weaken its magical bonds even a little by letting it get farther away from me."

"All right, but are you absolutely, positively sure that having it so close to it is safe?"

Ami nodded absently, busy with construction work in a different part of the dungeon. "I would assume so. At least, having it out here has to be safer than having it stuck in my head." She was rather happy about figuring out how to force the spirit to manifest. It would give her a target to aim at if it ever got free.

"In your head?" Cathy threw her hands up in the air. "That's it, I'm getting Snyder to poke you with some Light magic to clean-"

"NO!" Ami took a quick step back and shook her head violently at the thought of having to endure the repulsive sensation.

"Now that's a reassuring reaction," Cathy stated, crossing her arms. Despite the sarcasm, a hint of worry had crept into her voice.

Ami hurried to clarify the problem. "Look, I need to concentrate to keep the spirit subjugated, and Snyder's magic would be too distracting." Which was putting things mildly. "Besides, you know that I was planning to return with a bunch of controlled zombies."

"That burning ghost wasn't part of the plan! You have already

admitted that it's hard to control, and I'm suspecting that you are understating the difficulty. Just look at your eyes, they are glowing bright enough to read by." Cathy took a deep breath. "That thing is terrifying, and I don't understand why you don't just get rid of it."

"That's not as easy as it sounds. Now that it's in one piece, it reintegrates the power released when I kill a body."

Cathy frowned. "Aren't you supposed to have complete control over it?"

"I do, but I can't control its automatic process any better than you can control the function of your liver," Ami pointed out quite reasonably.

"So what *are* you going to do about it?"

"I still need it to maintain control over the zombies," Ami pointed out the obvious. "Once I have no more use for it, I'll send it into a temple of the Light."

"I am now trying to imagine the expression on the priests' faces when that thing walks in." Cathy chuckled a little, mollified. "All right, but I still have no idea what you want with that batch of rotten seafood down below."

"Well, I have an idea for getting some use out of the zombies," Ami said.

"Oh, yes, they look so very *useful*," the swordswoman said, her voice dripping with exasperation. "All right, I can almost see how the crocodiles and seals and even the turtles could, maybe, make the dwarfs hesitate, but the vast majority..." she gestured towards the window.

Below, an undead fish slipped off the back of the alligator it had ridden in on. With a powerful slap of its tail fin, it catapulted itself into the air. Metal clanged as it smacked against the chest of a reaperbot and flopped onto the floor. Additional strikes of its fin only managed to make it bounce in random directions.

"I rest my case."

Ami could certainly see why Cathy seemed underwhelmed by their combat potential. "Ah, but I don't intend on having them fight," she replied.

Gleaming new knives, tongs, and pliers hung from the brick walls, competing for space with chains and manacles. Below them, hot coals glowed within tall, goblet-shaped metal basins. Spaced evenly along the walls, they cast the room in a reddish light.

A woman with her hair tied back in an oiled braid stirred the embers with an iron rod, heating the tool to incandescence. She didn't seem to mind that she was risking severe burns, as her form-fitting black leather outfit left generous amounts of skin unprotected. Only her face was well fully covered by a long-beaked plague doctor's mask that fended off the stench of carrion permeating the air.

Other dark mistresses dressed in a similar way moved with purpose between racks, chairs with spike-covered seats, and similar torture devices. Their sadistic giggles filled the air, occasionally drowned out by the moans of their victims.

Whether or not the zombies were moaning because of their torturers' efforts remained unclear.

One of the dark mistresses in particular was not getting a sound out of the targets of her ministrations. The crabs and lobsters she was lowering into boiling oil simply didn't have the capacity to make noises other than the cracking and hissing of their flesh.

In contrast, one of her colleagues a few racks to the left was coaxing strangled gasps from the seal zombie she had strapped to a wheel. When she caressed it with the arcs of lightning flowing from her fingers, its muscles twitched, contracted and drove air through the animal's throat. She was also rapidly searing away her victim's remaining flesh, so her chosen method would not be working for much longer.

She would get a replacement soon, as an imp was already cranking a small winch and raising a squirming bag filled with more undead

from the dark pit in the centre of the room.

An ice golem sat at a desk near the exit, the glow of her eyes tinted violet from passing through her visor. Ami was taking notes on the proceedings, hoping to find a pattern to the results that made sense. Her sense of touch being off made typing slightly harder, but that drawback was well worth it in exchange for not having to perceive the smell of decay and burnt rotting flesh.

Her involuntary assistant for the experiments was hovering to her left. The spirit remained motionless, its form partially intersecting one of the burning basins without negative effects.

She wasn't surprised, since the thing didn't seem to interact with physical objects. It had only reacted once, when she had poked it with her adamantine dagger. The spirit had been flung away by the soft stab as if it weighted nothing at all. While satisfying to watch, that didn't exactly provide her with a means to contain the creature.

Through her awareness of the spirit, she noticed it feeling a brief pricking sensation, not unlike a hair being pulled out.

She recognised the sensation, having felt it a few times before. A piece of the creature's power had been plucked away from it. She sat up straighter, waiting for one of the dark mistress to approach and show off her success.

"Your Majesty, I have another one," one of the women called out, pushing up her mask so that her grinning face was visible. She turned and looked over her shoulder at something on the ground. "Hurry up, you!"

A large turtle that was missing its lower jaw shuffled after the woman as she walked towards the desk.

Ami blinked, her eyebrows rising as she stared at the impossible sight of the zombie with a minion bond. "H-how did you manage that? I know for a fact that they can't feel pain!"

In fact, the spirit didn't even notice damage to its bodies that wasn't crippling or fatal. Even the latter only registered as discomfort on the

level of a mild itch. It was the only reason why Ami consider torturing the undead creatures to be a moral grey area at worst.

If she had been wrong about that, then- well, she still wouldn't be guilty of anything more evil than animal cruelty, she comforted herself. Anxiously, she waited for her employee's explanation.

"Yes, I had to get creative," the woman laughed, leaning forward and putting her elbows on Ami's desk. "Such a challenge can be quite satisfying, if you know what I mean," she added in a throaty voice, almost shoving her chest in the seated girl's face.

To Ami's chagrin, the dark mistresses weren't following the trend of conjured cloaks, unlike the rest of the magic users in her employ. Their usual outfits already had little to fear from her dungeon's corruption.

"So what did you do?" she asked as she backed away from the awkward invasion of her personal space.

"Well, since pain wasn't working, I was going for full immersion in things opposed to the death god's sphere of influence," the mistress began.

Extrapolating from the themes of her dungeon's corruption, Ami already had an inkling of where this was going. "Continue," she said with a sinking feeling.

"First, I jabbed long needles deep into the zombie's flesh, implanting various kinds of plant seeds. Then, I seeded every inch of its body with mushroom spores. After forcing it to swallow a few handfuls of white, lively maggots, I placed it in a box full of randy fruit flies looking for a mate," the woman reported, almost purring. "And then I spoke blasphemous words talking about the pleasures of pen-"

"Uh, yes, I get it," Ami interrupted quickly, unwilling to listen to the sordid details. "I can see how that would be a torment to a creature of death." She couldn't help feel impressed by the effort the dark mistress had put into making the zombie miserable. Impressed and horrified. "This is certainly, um, outstanding work, and I commend your dedication, but, well, you needn't have gone through all that

trouble."

"Oh, it was no trouble at all," the dark mistress said. "I so enjoyed every little bit of progress."

Had the woman leaned in even closer? Ami squirmed on her seat, inching a little further away. "Still, I have no use for converted zombies. They are unhygienic, smelly, and leave pieces behind when they move." She pointed at the undead turtle that had almost reached them by now. "Please take it back and," her voice lowered as she almost stumbled over the words "torture it to death properly."

"Of course, Empress. If I may, it's a real honour to have you down here with us," the dark mistress continued, giving no indication that she was about to move away. "We are both amazed and curious about your work." She indicated Isolda, who was working in the corner the furthest away from Ami.

At the reminded, she grew aware of the weight of the enchanted amulet hanging from her neck, but she managed not to look down at it. "That's quite flattering, but could you-"

"We would be greatly honoured by a demonstration of your skill. I, for one, would also relish some more personal lessons directly underneath you."

Ami barely stopped herself from disappearing on the spot. She was smart enough to recognise double entendres, not that the leather-clad woman's tone and body language were hard to misunderstand. Being not interested at all in the offer, Ami felt completely embarrassed by the aggressive flirtation. Somehow, she managed to get the words "Back. To. Work." out without stammering.

The dark mistress looked disappointed as she nodded. "Of course, your Majesty."

When she left, Ami let out a sigh of relief and shook her head. She had barely enough time to move her chair back closer to her desk before another female silhouette approached.

The woman pointed her right thumb at the pale white glow that

floated above her bare shoulder. "I got this one from some fish," she said in a bored voice. "Any better than the last?"

On closer inspection, the almost transparent apparition swimming through the air had indeed the stream-lined shape of a fish. To be more precise, it was the the front half of a fish. Everything behind the main fins dissolved into a trail of indistinct mist.

Ami inspected the ghost through her visor before standing up and softly flicking her finger through the pale shape.

The ghost popped like a soap bubble, leaving nothing but a cold breeze behind.

"I'm afraid it's still not strong enough," she replied to the question. "At least, this latest result confirms that the size of the zombie's body affects the ghost that results from its death." She wasn't actually sure that the destruction of an undead creature was a real death, but at least her torture chamber considered it to be one.

Since the evil magic inherent in the room's design probably wasn't meant to turn one kind of undead into another, the ghosts produced so far were decidedly substandard. The chamber wasn't working very well without agony to catalyse the victim's transformation into a ghost, and getting it to properly recognise the moment of a zombie's "death" and trigger the process also remained more art than science.

Ami suspected that success would be impossible without the spirit's forced cooperation. By ordering it to keep the part of itself that was animating a body together for as long as possible, she gave the torture chamber enough time to bind the emulated soul and turn it into an angry ghost. In theory.

In practice, Ami wasn't sure she was really creating animal ghosts. It was possible that she was merely ripping parts of the spirit off and turning them into mini-spirits bound to her direct control. Still, as long as the individual pieces remained sub-sapient, the difference was mainly academic.

Or at least it would be once she had refined the process.

"Oh well, I guess back to work then," the dark mistress said, pulling Ami out of her thoughts. "I'd honestly prefer to be working on a few of the prisoners," she stated.

"You have your orders," Ami answered sharply, feeling sickened as she imagined a dwarf instead of a zombie on one of the spiky torture devices. She wished she didn't have to interact with the dark mistresses, as she found everything about them repulsive.

In the back of the room, boiling oil fountained upwards as one of the crabs within burst apart. It failed to produce a ghost.

Right, back to optimisation. The main problem, according to her partial model of the process, was the lack of density of spirit-stuff within the undead bodies. This, at least, was something she could easily adjust. *"Rabixtrel, continue the extermination,"* she mentally ordered her horned reaper.

The red-scaled demon was currently on the Avatar Islands , patrolling the shore and gathering small, beached zombies into a large barrel. At her command, he perked up and raced over to a a huge cylinder-shaped device with a long lever sticking horizontally out from one side.

In principle, the metal construction was a mill of the kind usually turned by draft animals walking around it. Of course, Rabixtrel wasn't using it to grind grains. He lifted his barrel up over his shoulder and dumped its smelly, writhing content into the funnel above the grinder. Dust clouds fountained around his hooves as he sprinted over to the lever in his eagerness to start turning the zombies into mincemeat.

Ami was glad the reaper didn't mind destroying them in an impersonal, industrial fashion. She needed the useless bodies destroyed as quickly as possible so the concentration of the spirit's power within the remaining ones increased.

Since she didn't have the logistics to transport masses of aquatic undead, it had been trivially simple to decide which ones she would keep. She had simply ordered all of them to climb on land. The ones that got stuck on the beach were automatically disqualified.

It meant that the prison-pits below her torture chamber were now mostly filled with amphibious creatures such as turtles, walruses, crabs, alligators, newts, giant frogs, and even squids.

As Rabixtrel eliminated more of the leftovers, the power readings of the zombies inside the chamber slowly changed.

Another dark mistress was bringing her a ghost. This one had a shark's face and was large enough to swallow someone's head whole.

Ami briefly wondered how a shark had even managed to get here. The undead didn't need to breathe, so she supposed it wasn't impossible for a strong enough fish to slither across the ground like a stiff snake, but it couldn't have been easy. In any case, this ghost looked more promising than the previous ones.

As the mist-like head of the animal approached, the air went noticeably colder.

Ami smiled at the dark mistress. "Good work. This one has the kind of presence I was looking for. Leave it here with me, please."

"Of course, Empress." the woman bowed and left, leaving the fish hovering above Ami's desk.

The young Keeper could already tell that the being counted as one of her minions, but to be absolutely certain, she ordered the spirit to make the ghost shark turn around.

The tooth-filled maw kept stubbornly facing her, and she felt a pulse of intensified loathing from the minion of Crowned Death.

With her curiosity satisfied, the turned to a dark corner. "Golga, please come here."

In the shadows, a statue-still silhouette wrapped in a black cloak suddenly moved. It slid closer without making a sound, moving into the light of the glowing coals. Pale skin shone almost red and fangs poked out over bloodless lips as the vampire revealed herself. "Your Majesty?"

She pointed at the tooth-filled face of the animal ghost. "Do your ghost-wrangling techniques work on it?"

Golga's blood-coloured eyes flashed once, and she made a beckoning gesture with her arm. The rest of her body remained still like a corpse.

The ghost shark approached the vampire and started to circle her. At one point, in floated over to a rack, took one of its chains into its mouth, pulled on it, and then returned to Golga.

"It responds to my orders about as well as Zarekos' minions did, as long as I can picture its task properly," the vampire reported. "It does not understand orders that I cannot show it."

"That's good to know," Ami nodded. When she had accepted the vampires into her service, she hadn't expected their expertise at ghost handling to turn out useful. "I will be putting you in charge of commanding a number of the new ghosts," she decided.

"Of course, your Majesty." Golga smiled, which didn't make her look any livelier.

"Be aware that I will hold you responsible for anything the ghosts do wrong under your command," Ami warned, trying to sound intimidating. She didn't dare deploy them on their own, given their lack of intelligence, so their handler needed to follow her orders to the letter.

Golga bowed. "I would not have expected anything different. Zarekos had the same policy."

Ami felt a brief moment of doubt. Should she be doing things the same way as another Keeper? In this particular case, she probably didn't need to worry. Trying to maintain discipline was not inherently evil. "Well, I'm glad I won't have to explain further, then." Mainly because she didn't have to specify the consequences for failure. "Oh, and one more thing, Golga."

"Yes?"

She shifted her view to the chamber where cloaked figures stood

around pumpkin-sized eyeballs on stalks. "I need someone who can handle the scavenger room with subtlety. Send me the best expert of your group."

"It shall be done." Golga bowed again and slid back into the darkness, recognising the dismissal.

Water dripped in irregular intervals from the ceiling of the warm, humid prison. A few of the drops landed in the shallow drain running down the length of the corridor, with louder splashes. The rest splattered onto the floor tiles and made them slippery, occasionally providing entertainment for the dwarven prisoners at the expense of the patrolling goblins.

Confined within separate and dry cells, the dwarfs had nothing to fear from the drizzle. Nevertheless, they did not look particularly amused at the moment. Most of them were wearing only in whatever they had been wearing underneath their armour, and neither the battle nor the dungeon's corruption had been kind to their outfits. Nevertheless, they stood right in front of the bars, watching the confrontation taking place a few empty cells further down the corridor.

"...besides, you are not even a real princess!" a loud, female shout echoed off the prison's damp walls.

"I'm too! I am the heiress to an empire, you potato-nosed snob!" Tiger's voice shouted back. She grabbed the bars of the dwarf's cells, the metal ringing from the impact. "That trumps whatever shabby little fief you are a princess of!"

"Shabby little-" the dwarf woman went as red as her hair red and looked as if she would explode. With visible effort, she forced down her anger and crossed her arms. "Right now, you are just some random monster with no title at all," she said, staring smugly at the youma. "Which makes you my social inferior. Commoner."

The two goblins flanking Tiger glared at the insolent prisoner, and one of them let out an angry growl. The other took a step forward,

stomping his boot in the drain and sending a spray of tepid water in the dwarf's direction.

Tiger shot him a glare, and he froze, hung his head, and returned to his place at the orange-skinned girl's side.

"Oh, at least you have trained your pets well. Or was that someone else, since you don't really look that competent?" the imprisoned dwarf asked.

"You should really watch your tongue," Tiger said, frowning at the woman.

"Or what?" the prisoner challenged.

In the cell across the hallway from her, another dwarf shook his head silently, his beard whipping left and right as he put both hands over his mouth.

The intended target of his mimed advice never noticed it, as she kept her gaze firmly on Tiger. "Are you going to threaten me with dragging me off to the same fate as my valiant warriors?"

A number of nearby cells were open, still showing signs of recent occupation.

"Why would I threaten you with something that's going to happen soonish anyway?" Tiger asked, an ugly grin appearing on her face when the dwarf woman's pupils shrank in sudden fright.

"You will not break me, demon!" the dwarf stated, scowling.

"Well, yes, obviously," Tiger said cheerfully.

"You- what?" The princess' defiant stance wavered at the admission.

"If you really want to know what happened to those other dwarfs," the youma said, pointing at the empty cells, "I can tell you." She leaned in as if she was about to divulge a great secret. "The truth is that my sister, the Empress, is using them to refine her interrogation techniques."

The dwarf's face went first slack, then pale, and finally settled on furious.

"Tiger, that is quite enough," Ami intruded on the squabble with a telepathic message. *"I am ready to see her now, please move away from the cell."*

"Hah, and just now she told me she's about to take you away!" Tiger added as a parting shot, grinning as she turned to leave. A wave of her hand, and the goblin guards hurried after her.

Ami was displeased by Tiger's taunting of the prisoner. Insinuating that the woman was about to be tortured definitely went too far even if she had been needlessly antagonistic.

Four orcs turned the corned and entered the hallway, approaching the cell.

Ami could have used Keeper transport to bring the prisoner to her throne room instantly, but Snyder had suggested that she avoid reminding the dwarfs about her Keeper status as much as possible. Moving the prisoners in a way that resembled their own customs would make them feel as if they were meeting a legitimate ruler, rather than a Keeper.

The team of orcs took position around the cell with practised ease, two holding their clubs at the ready while a third hung back with a crossbow. The fourth unlocked the door and stepped aside to let his armed companions enter.

"You filthy savages! Don't you dare lay a hand on me!" the prisoner shouted, backing away against the wall of her cell.

The two orcs approached, unimpressed by the woman's raised fists.

"The Empress is watching," one of them spoke in a gravelly voice. "You can either come quietly or come twitching and mildly scorched."

The princess hesitated for a moment, cobalt eyes narrowed as she considered her options. Finally, she dropped her combat stance and stood ramrod straight. "Fine. Let none say that I did not meet my

fate with dignity."

"Blindfold," the orc who had threatened her commanded, unimpressed.

As the pink-skinned soldiers readied the dwarf for transport, Ami took the opportunity to inspect her a little more closely in preparation for their impending conversation.

The princess was looking surprisingly good for someone who had been thrown into jail wearing nothing but battle-damaged undergarments. One of the other dwarfs had thrown her an shirt that was much larger than her own. It went down to just above her knees, and its sleeves had been removed and re-purposed as a sash and a few ribbons. Even without tools, the tailor had somehow managed to adjust the fabric so that even the damage looked like decorative frills.

Amazed, Ami noted that the improvised dress didn't need to fear a comparison with her own. The daring cut even seemed to be making concessions to the effects of her corruption. If dwarven craftsmanship could do *this*, then a few of their tailors would be able to do a lot about improving her dungeon's clothing situation.

The orcs were leading the blindfolded woman out of her cell now, keeping a loose grip on her upper arms. Not that she needed the guidance, as even blind, she didn't stumble.

Nevertheless, the blindfold gave Ami the opportunity to cast one of the spells she had found in Malleus' dungeon on the princess. It deceived the senses, and the late Keeper had named it 'Turncoat', since he had used it to make enemies attack their allies. Ami had a more benevolent use for it in mind - simulating peer pressure. She needed any advantage she could get if she wanted to convince the woman that the dwarfs should stop their attacks.

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Noble Conversations

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The orcs released their iron grip on Iden's upper arms, allowing her to stop.

She tensed, listening into the darkness behind the blindfold.

The footsteps of the guards retreated, and her mineral sense reported their metal armours lining up behind her.

Together, the orcs dropped to one knee and lowered their heads.

Iden swallowed. She was in the same room as the dark empress. Was it a torture chamber? She sniffed the air, almost sick with worry.

No blood. The air smelt humid, but with a hint of smoke.

Torches? Braziers? A basin filled with red-hot irons? Iden took a long breath and concentrated on suppressing her shivers. She would not besmirch her honour by showing fear in front of the enemy.

"Rise," a young-sounding female voice said from somewhere ahead. It echoed faintly, indicating that the room was large and open.

The dark empress herself? Iden didn't find the voice intimidating. She shook her head - those were dangerous thoughts when dealing with a Keeper.

"Captain Lugot, you and your squad may leave after taking off her blindfold," the voice continued.

One of the shapes behind Iden raised its metal gauntlet towards its helmet, saluting. The collection of metal pieces moved on to approach her from behind. A moment later, the knot of her blindfold came loose, and the piece of dark cloth fell off.

Iden took a blind step away from the orc, unable to see in the sudden brightness. Squinting, she spotted two braziers burning at the end of a long hall. Between them, gilded stairs drew her gaze upwards.

On a throne concealed by the glare, two spots of crimson glowed at head-height.

Iden froze as if she had spotted a poisonous snake. Not daring to look away from the figure on the throne, she wished her eyes would adapt to the light faster. Every gesture, every expression and every twitch of the enemy's face could prove vital to her continued survival. She didn't know what the Keeper wanted from her yet, but she was determined not to give it to her.

Behind her, the orc bellowed "Dwarf, you are in the presence of her Imperial Majesty Sailor Mercury, Empress of the Avatar Islands! Introduce yourself!"

She twitched at the volume and reflexively stood straight as she processed his words. Her mouth was already opening before she managed to remind herself that Mercury was foreign nobility, and a Keeper to boot.

Nevertheless, her title was real and demanded a minimum of courtesy and respect.

Reluctantly, she inclined her head. "Iden Sodnil," she said, proud to keep her voice unwavering, "second daughter of Baron Sodnil."

The indistinct silhouette of the dark empress nodded once. "Welcome. You are the first dwarven leader I have the opportunity to hold a civil conversation with," she said.

That was a distinction Iden could have lived without. At least, she could comfort herself with the knowledge that none of her fellow nobles had been captured.

The two red glows in Mercury's face narrowed. "Of course, I would have preferred someone who wasn't involved in slaughtering the helpless wounded," she continued in a cold voice.

Iden didn't flinch, but it was a near thing. Then, she got angry at the hypocrisy of a *Keeper* complaining about unsavoury combat tactics.

After Mercury's revelation, displeased muttering came from - above?

She allowed herself a brief look around while trying to come up with an answer that wouldn't get her killed or tortured in a fit of pique. Right now, she couldn't see the empress well enough to discern her body language anyway.

There were balconies to the left and right on the hall, with minions on top. Shoddy architecture in comparison with dwarven work, held up by tasteless pillars. Below, in the shadows, skulked more trolls and orcs and even a few dwarfs.

Her heart skipped a beat, and it took all of her hard-earned discipline to not gape like some common yokel. Those, those rotten *traitors*! How dare they? Didn't they remember- no. She couldn't get worked up now. The dark empress was waiting for an answer.

She could almost feel the expectant gazes of the audience on her, urging her on. "I do not have to justify my tactical decisions to the enemy," she snapped, unable to contain her anger.

The words hung in the room, which fell silent.

Realising just how confrontational that had sounded, she quickly added "With all due respect."

Mercury's scowl deepened.

Iden almost regretted being able to see her properly now. "However, if I had to justify my actions, then I would point out that leaving active enemies in my back would have been suicidal. Especially with no way to secure prisoners."

Mercury's lips pressed closer together, forming a thin line. One of her hands tightened its grip on the armrest of her throne briefly before relaxing.

Signs of barely-restrained anger, Iden suspected. Of course, the dark empress was an evil mastermind and could be an

accomplished actress. Then again, she was also an upstart commoner raised to the ranks of nobility. She wouldn't have had a proper education, so she might be betraying her real emotions here.

The brighter red glow in Mercury's eyes hinted at the latter possibility. "You should not have attacked, then," the girl said, her voice no longer calm.

Iden simply couldn't stop herself. "Neither should you," she quipped, a hint of smugness in her voice. Inwardly, she cringed. Was she actually trying to goad the Keeper into killing her? While a good way to avoid torture, suicide was shameful cowardice.

Mercury blinked, perhaps taken aback by Iden's boldness.

Iden secretly scoffed at the reaction, which she would have expected from a mere commoner. It fit with Mercury's general appearance. Her dress was of similar quality to what the daughter of a mildly successful merchant would wear - before the guards dragged her away for indecent exposure. That Keeper was insulting proper nobles everywhere by wearing something so scandalously short and clingy in front of her court!

"I did not attack you," Mercury said, some of the heat leaving her voice.

That clinched it for Iden. Only an amateur would be put so easily on the defensive. "You have violated the borders of Nimbadnur," she elaborated. "As a noble sworn to protect this land, I demand that you and your troops withdraw from our territory at once!"

"Impossible," Mercury replied immediately.

Well, it had been worth a try. Being in a position where she had very little to lose was making her feel bolder.

"However, I am not the one who is to blame for the current situation," the dark empress continued, her voice accusatory. "By your own laws, I should have been listened to when I asked to negotiate. It is my right as an empress."

"Those laws weren't written with Keepers in mind," Iden stated the

obvious.

"Why would that change anything?" the dark empress asked. She didn't sound angry, merely curious. Curious and eager.

Iden's hackles rose. If she wasn't completely wrong, then Mercury was about to spring some kind of rhetorical trap on her. Obviously, she couldn't trust a word the enemy said. No matter what, she wouldn't betray her country! "Anyone who serves a Keeper is considered insane. Someone like that is not entitled to the usual privileges of nobility," she summarised the relevant parts she remembered.

"Anyone *serving* Keepers. Your laws make no provisions for nobles who *are* Keepers. I had people research this issue," the dark empress stated confidently.

If that was all that Mercury was betting on, then Iden had nothing to fear. "Are you implying that Keepers aren't inherently self-serving?"

If the dark empress was offended, she didn't show it. A faint smile played around her lips. "Ah, but answer me a simple question. Does or doesn't your law derive its legitimacy from the Light?"

"It does," she answered after a brief moment of hesitation. It was a simple, undeniable fact.

"Now, did or didn't the Light gods know that I was a Keeper when they made me the Empress of the Avatar Islands?"

Iden's thoughts ground to a halt. She could already see where the dark empress was going with this, and she didn't like the direction at all. "They did," she grumbled.

Mercury smiled. "And would the Light gods knowingly bestow a noble title on someone who wasn't fit to rule?"

"They clearly did," Iden thought rebelliously. On some level, Mercury herself had to be aware of this, since she wasn't wearing a proper crown - merely a tiara with a large sapphire set in its centre. Was some last shred of decency stopping her from donning all of the trappings of the title she didn't deserve? "I do not presume to

understand the motivations behind the actions of the gods," she answered diplomatically.

"Well then, do you think that your laws are more important than the wishes of the Light, from whom they derive their legitimacy?" Mercury insisted.

Dangerous terrain. Iden clenched her teeth and stared straight ahead. She didn't have an acceptable reply. Obviously, the law wasn't above the will of the gods. On the other hand, she couldn't state in good conscience that the Light really wanted for Mercury to be an empress.

"Please answer the question," the dark empress demanded when the silence stretched.

Unfortunately, Mercury was within her rights to expect an answer. Tradition demanded that she respect fellow nobles, especially those of higher rank. Even if they were foreign and evil. On the other hand, the law mandated that Keepers had to be destroyed, and any cooperation with them was forbidden.

Iden wondered if she should escape the situation by dashing forward, grabbing one of the braziers, and bashing the Keeper's head in. She dismissed that idea a split-second after considering it. Even if she wasn't tackled on the way or incinerated by foul magic, the dark empress could reportedly defeat a horned reaper in hand-to-hand combat. Still, a quick death might be better than whatever the Keeper had in store for her.

The gazes of the other dwarfs bored into her back, silent and disapproving.

Iden wasn't keen on dying, and she was embarrassing herself with her inability to answer. "The Light has more authority, but They would have taken action with the expectation that we will keep following our laws," she spoke.

The dark empress smiled. "Well, then there is no problem. Your laws don't cover my specific situation, and your gods have expressed their will on this issue. I am a noble, and you would have

to abide by any agreements I made with your leaders."

Iden gritted her teeth so hard she feared she would chip them. Looking at the floor, she said "I cannot spot the flaw in your argumentation," she admitted in defeat. Was this how Mercury had started grinding down the resolve of the other dwarfs? Her presence was a lot more intimidating when she couldn't simply be dismissed as an insane maniac with no right to rule.

"Thank you. With that out of the way, I think you would be of sufficient rank to make yourself heard if I used you as a go-between for negotiations?" Mercury asked, suddenly all business.

"What is there to negotiate?" she asked in surprise.

"Ceasefires, cessation of hostilities and hostage exchanges, to start with."

"That's not going to happen. None of it," she said with conviction, staring straight into Mercury's eyes. Keeper Bartholomeus - cursed be his name - had demonstrated only fifteen years ago how much harm a Keeper who wasn't stopped quickly could do. "Your continued presence in our lands is intolerable."

The disappointment creeping on Mercury's face did much to lift Iden's mood.

"What about the prisoners I took during the assault? I can't imagine that you don't want them back," the Empress asked, sounding almost pleading.

Iden thought about her father, who was probably worrying about her being tortured right now. Her throat constricting as she said "There's nothing to be gained from ransoming hostages from a Keeper. We either free them or bury them," she explained. It painted a bleak picture of her own future, she realised.

"That's horrible!" the dark empress exclaimed and shifted on her throne uneasily.

Who was she trying to kid? "Keepers are even more horrible! It's the only sane approach to take!"

Mercury sighed and lowered her head. "You have given me much to think about. For the moment, you are dismissed."

An instant later, Iden found herself back in a cell, though it was a more comfortable one than her previous one.

Six burning candles decorated the small shrine to the Light travelling through the tunnel, riding on a wheelbarrow. A dwarven priest was pushing the vehicle forwards at a steady pace, carefully keeping the shrine from scraping against the roughly hewn walls.

Behind him, two guards in full plate armour marched in lock-step, carrying heavy coils of warding chain. A similar pair moved at the end of the procession, following the palanquin of a white-haired wizard holding a crystal ball within his shaky grasp.

In the middle of all these precautions, the commanders of the forces besieging Whitemountain were walking alongside a rolling map table.

"We *have* to rescue the hostages right now," a bald dwarf with a rusty red beard said. "Those large torture chambers she built don't leave us much of a choice, and-"

Baron Lolok raised his hand. "Baron Sodnil, I understand that you want to save your daughter, but caution-"

Sodnil glared at him so fiercely that the other man swallowed.

Count Ornish sympathised with the red-bearded baron's anger. He didn't want to imagine what it would feel like if one of his own children was about to be tortured by a Keeper.

"This isn't only about Iden!" Sodnil said loudly, his brow furrowed. "This isn't even only about our men captured by that monster!" He slammed his palm onto one of the floor plans of the dungeon. "Have you forgotten all about her other hostages?"

Ornish recognised the map as one of the dungeon's lower layers, where the human prisoners of the dark empress dwelt. He'd seen

them briefly in the crystal ball and pitied them. Children and teenagers clad in barely decent rags, forced to live in a den of evil and immorality. Without enough adults to guide them on the right path, they had little hopes of resisting the Keeper's corrupting influence. "You believe she will no longer be satisfied with turning them to her side slowly?"

Baron Sodnil nodded. "Yes, my liege. She needs troops, therefore she will not ignore such a resource!"

"Now wait a moment," the third baron objected. Zonbal was a heavily-built dwarf whose beard resembled the puffy cheeks of a hamster. "That's not a conclusion we should jump to lightly. Yes, she tried to deceive us about getting orc support," he inclined his head briefly towards the wizard with his crystal ball, "but that doesn't mean her dungeon is undermanned right now!"

"Let's see," Sodnil said, raising his hand. "She tried to talk us into not attacking, she took prisoners rather than killing our soldiers, she built torture chambers, she tried to deceive us about her troop strength, and she is fortifying her position. With each point, he had raised one finger. "The conclusion is clear: she is not ready for an all-out assault. If we use all of our troops this time-"

"We are much weaker than we started out, too!" Zonbal interrupted, raising his voice. "The men we had to evacuate through the hero gate are still at the capital, and so is the Avatar!"

"Great help that *he* was," Lolok muttered into his beard, crossing his arms.

Count Ornish weighted the arguments. If he gave up on maintaining a secure perimeter, he *could* mount an assault with one and a half again as many soldiers as the first one. By focusing on reaching the hostages, rather than generalised demolition, he should be able to rescue them and then beat a hasty retreat. "I am inclined to side with Baron Sodnil here," he said. "Inaction will not serve us."

"But my liege!" Zonbal said, his face pale. "It would be wiser to wait for the Duke's reinforcements! The dark empress may deploy more lethal measures if we press her too hard!"

"Coward," Sodnil shouted. "We will be forced to fight our own people if we wait a few days! Do you want that?"

Zonbal ignored him and continued pleading with Count Ornish. "It's too dangerous! What about the recent quakes?" He moved his index finger over a map that showed the surface. The digit hovered briefly over the red-circled epicentres located around the dungeon.

Ornish turned is head towards the wizard, who was resting on his pillows.

"Sorry, it's dark. Can't see a thing," the elderly dwarf said, waving his hand over the crystal ball.

"Perhaps I can shed some light on this," Baron Lolok said. "I took the liberty of sending some scouts to take a closer look."

"Dangerous," Zonbal commented, scratching his chin.

"It's neutral territory, the risks were minimal," Lolok contradicted.

"Well, what did they find?" Baron Sodnil asked impatiently.

"Zones where the underground has been smashed into rubble by some kind of magic. Basically, we have to dig through a zone of loose rock to get into the dungeon."

Count Ornish scoffed. "Is that all? It sounds like something our engineers can handle easily."

Lolok shrugged. "It would pose a significant obstacle to imps and lesser miners," he said. "The dark empress may not be fully aware of our capabilities."

Ornish smiled. "That would be a welcome advantage," he thought out loud. "If we could surprise her by attacking from a direction she isn't expecting..."

Baron Zonbal sighed and lowered his head in defeat.

A new sound could be heard over the synchronised footsteps of the marching soldiers. Someone was running towards the group, only to

be stopped by the rearmost guards.

"Quick, let me through," the new arrival said as he caught his breath. With his body concealed underneath a cloak that shifted colours to adapt to its environment, it looked as if his head was floating. "I have urgent news for the Lords!"

"Let him pass," Ornish ordered, both curious and worried. Surprises, in his experience, were rarely a good thing during war.

"Ghosts," the scout said between panting breaths. "In the fissures!"

"Ghosts?" Sodnil said incredulously, raising an eyebrow. "Are you sure? Everyone knows about her feud with the dark god of the undead."

"One of them bit my partner," the scout said flatly, shooting the baron a dark look.

Ornish didn't like where this was going. "Explain. Where did you spot the ghosts?"

The scout "River. Near the quake-damaged areas. Azok - that's my partner - wanted to check out a fissure near the waterline."

Someone arrived with a full mug and proffered it to the tired dwarf.

He grabbed it and chugged it down in one go. "Ah, that's better." He blinked at the waiting nobles. "Right. So Azok wanted to check how much water was draining into the underground, but he slipped. Water was pretty deep there. Gave me a good fright when he went under. Not as much as the ghost, though."

"What ghost?" Baron Sodnil interrupted.

Ornish shot him a glare and raised his hand in a shushing motion.

"The one attached to his leg when I pulled him out," the scout said, shivering. "Looked horrible. Frozen blood on its fangs, mist drifting from its face. Anyway, Azok was screaming and thrashing, so I poked the thing with my sword. It let go, thank the Light, but then more started popping out of the water like mushrooms. We ran. Had

to carry him half the way."

"Good work, soldier," Count Ornish complimented the exhausted man. "Go take a rest and have another drink. I'll send someone to take a more detailed report later."

"Thank you, my Liege." The scout bowed deeply and departed, at a much more sedate pace than he had come.

The assembled nobles looked at each other as they digested the new information.

"So. Ghosts," Count Ornish began. "Thoughts?"

"How?" Baron Sodnil asked, his voice shrill. "It should be impossible, the god of the undead hates her!"

Baron Lolok shrugged. "Nevertheless, there they are. Hmm." His haggard features grew thoughtful. "No bones nor bodies for us to sense. They'd be perfect for an ambush."

"Trap." Zonbal stated, slamming his fist into his palm. "She wants us to attack! The torture chambers, the fake reinforcements - it's all part of her plan to make us charge in recklessly!"

Count Ornish felt his hackles rise. Zonbal's words made too much sense. He had been about to lead his men straight to their doom.

The vampire stood transfixed, unable to tear his gaze from the expanding puddle of blood on the floor of Ami's lab.

"Believe me, you don't want *any* of that," Tiger commented with a smirk, jolting the undead monster from his stupor.

He turned to look at the youma in confusion, his expression urging her to elaborate.

Ami cleared her throat, reminding him of her presence. "I believe you were here to report on something?"

The black-robed figure jerked upright, the tip of his tongue darting back into his mouth. "Yes, your Majesty, please forgive my lapse of attention. Golga informs me that the ghosts have all been returned to their lair, without further incidents. Do you have additional orders that require my particular skills?"

"No, I am satisfied with your current achievements," she replied. "And please stop staring at the experiment."

Tiger snickered.

"Apologies, your Majesty." He swivelled to face Ami directly, without moving any of his limbs.

"You did great work luring those scouts to where they were needed," she continued. "Are you certain they won't suspect foul play?"

"Almost completely. I projected only a hint of movement in the corner of an eye here, the warning cry of a disturbed animal there..." The vampire shrugged. "Small nudges, but enough to guide them in the right direction."

"Wait, you can do that with the scavenger room?" Tiger asked.

"It would be a poor tool for corrupting the weak-minded if it couldn't influence them without being blatantly obvious."

Ami nodded slowly, feeling a little uncomfortable. Personally, she had never practised enough with the giant bobbing eyes to send anything more complex than words, so she had to trust in him knowing what he was doing.

"As for your Majesty's own contribution, I don't believe they noticed," the unnaturally still figure continued. "Indeed, under the circumstances, they would have had no time to wonder about why a stone came loose under a foot."

Ami winced. She hadn't enjoyed making the dwarf fall into the cold river in the first place, but him getting bitten by an overly aggressive ghost hadn't been part of the plan. "Oh, and tell Golga that I don't blame her for the bite. That was due to the spirit's interference," she said.

The evil thing was in bad shape from the repeated ghost extractions and more irate than ever. At some point, it had dropped below the threshold of power necessary to maintain sapience, rendering it unable to comprehend complex orders. This gave it more leeway than Ami would have liked.

The vampire's gaze lingered briefly on the floor tile underneath which she had temporarily stored the angry spirit. "She will be relieved to hear that, I'm sure, and I shall inform her forthwith. By your leave?"

"Dismissed," Ami confirmed.

With a last, longing look at the blood on the floor, the creature floated toward the exit.

By now, the puddle had expanded enough that it threatened to touch Tiger's toes.

The youma took a hasty step backwards and turned towards Ami, putting her hands on her hips. "What a mess. I told you to ask Jadeite for help!"

"I couldn't, not for something like this," Ami protested, covering her cheeks with her hands as she shook her head.

"What's the problem? I'm sure he wouldn't mind," Tiger said, her tone turning mischievous. "He might even see something that gives him ideas," she added with a wink.

Ami flushed. "Tiger! D-don't imply improper things like that," she said in a scandalised voice. Turning away from her adopted sister, she pointed at the third occupant of the room. "Can't you fix that instead?"

A bleeding figure that could have been Ami's twin stood in the spotlight, leaking blood from many long gashes in her skin.

Ami's stomach twisted just from looking at the wounds. She focused on the figure's right elbow, where a ragged slit ran almost all the way around the joint. Through the gaping tear in the skin, she could see the blood-smeared ice below.

"It's difficult," Tiger whined.

A small patch of skin flaked off the animated statue and landed in the puddle on the ground, sending ripples through the red liquid.

"J-just dispel it already," Ami instructed, looking away. She was extremely grateful that the disguised golem's face remained serene and expressionless. Glamour could simulate senses, and the statue looked as if it should have been in excruciating pain.

"Fine. This *is* pretty gross," the youma agreed.

The blood on the floor turned into water, and the ice golem's skin faded away, turning smooth and reflective. Within moments, all of the gashes on her body had filled, leaving her looking none the worse for wear.

"I don't understand why this is so difficult for you," Ami said, honestly puzzled. "You already taught me that corpse decoy glamour. Shouldn't this be extremely similar?"

"Asks the girl who isn't able to cast even the simplest glamour without possessing someone and having them demonstrate it over and over again until she can copy it," Tiger answered, visibly satisfied about excelling in an area that Ami was weak in.

Ami clenched her teeth. The fact that Tiger was basically correct stung her pride. Sure, she could go through the motions, shape her magic in the right way and get the expected result, but she had to work by pure rote memory. "It just doesn't make sense to me," she said heatedly.

Tiger patted her on the head. "Well, being the smart big sister that I am, I shall explain the problem. This is something completely different from the corpse since I don't have the luxury of creating something from a blank slate. I need to keep the base alive and working correctly while melding it seamlessly into the glamour. Also, the glamour itself isn't just some dead matter, which- "

"I get it," Ami said, looking at the floor. "My assumptions were wrong and I shouldn't have been too embarrassed to ask Jadeite for help

with this."

"True, but I think I've got this now," Tiger said, approaching the golem and putting one finger on her forehead. "If I make the skin stick better to the ice underneath, that should stop it from getting overstretched and tearing. Let's see..."

With a shimmer that looked like heat haze, the statue's surface turned soft and flesh-coloured. Strands of ice transformed into blue hair, and clear irises gained a shade of blue that Ami used to see in the mirror. The result of Tiger's glamour looked good so far, but so had the previous one at the start.

"Now we just need to check if it will burst open again," the orange-skinned girl said as she took a few steps back. "Golem, copy my movements!" she commanded as she started doing jumping jacks.

The statue diligently mirrored Tiger's actions, without causing any disturbing tearing noises or spurting blood.

Encouraged, the youma moved on to more challenging stretching exercises that Ami recognised from gym class.

So far, the golem's skin seemed to remain intact even as she explored the limits of human motion. When she tried to mimic Tiger balancing on one leg, she fell over since she had a different centre of gravity, but even her scrapes looked realistic.

"Yeah, I think that's enough," Tiger said, stopping with the exercises. "Looks like a success to me."

"It would be good if the glamour did something about changing the clothes too," Ami suggested, her cheeks burning. She didn't want to find out what wearing ice chainmail on bare skin felt like.

"And add even more complexity to the spell? Remember, you still have to learn it. Just transform before you use it or get changed the normal way."

Ami nodded. That was a solution she could live with.

"I still don't get why you don't just have Jadeite apply the glamour

before you leave," her adopted sister continued.

"He won't be around when I go visit the duke of Salthalls," Ami answered.

Last edited: Aug 26, 2016

Ultimatum

A group of crows cawed in surprise when a sinister presence joined them on top of the inaccessible rock spire that served as their nesting grounds. Startled, the birds launched themselves into the cloudy sky, ascending in a spiralling path so they could keep a wary eye on the female figure that had disturbed them.

Ami briefly tracked them with her gaze, worried that they would come back to defend their nests. The crows back at Rei's shrine were somewhat aggressive, and the last thing she needed was being pecked at while she was preoccupied with not slipping on the weather-worn stone. There wasn't much room here up here on top of the rock, and taking more than two steps in any direction would send her tumbling down a near-vertical incline into the river below.

About half a kilometre downstream, the stream's slow-moving waters touched the city walls of Salthalls. Taller than the nearby pines, the massive fortifications followed the contours of the river, turning it into a natural moat. The smooth stone blocks on the bottom part of the wall had a muddier tone than the others, indicating that they were frequently submerged during floods.

Since they were above water right now, Ami concluded that the torrential rainfalls caused by her dungeon's corruption hadn't caused the surrounding rivers to swell so far. Good, that was one less thing the dwarves could hate her for. She turned her attention to the war preparations going on in the city proper.

Her elevated vantage point wasn't quite tall enough to peer over the walls, but she could still see the parts of the city that were farther up on the mountain's slope. The most remote buildings were hewn right into the steep mountainside, next to each other, forming tall rectangles with many windows.

Ami felt a pang of homesickness at the sight, as it reminded her of the skyline of a modern city. The scale was completely different, of course. The buildings here were far, far shorter than Tokyo's

skyscrapers, and the settlement itself was tiny by her standards. Yet, according to her dwarven prisoners, it was one of the largest cities of their kingdom, with over twenty-thousand permanent residents.

Even that comparatively low number was hard to believe when the parts enclosed by the city walls fit into an area of less than a square kilometre.

Ami reminded herself that most of the city was below ground and that the surface part was the proverbial tip of the iceberg. It wasn't meant to house thousands of people, which showed. Carts laden with supplies slowly forced their way through the crowds, causing her to wonder how people weren't constantly being trampled by the draft animals. There were militiamen everywhere, most of them congregating on the city's open plazas. They had to be levies from the surrounding regions, assembled here to be drilled into proper soldiers. Soldiers she needed to prevent from reaching her dungeon.

With a sigh, she verified that she looked presentable. Under her cloak, a freshly-summoned Sailor Mercury uniform in blue and black remained yet uncorrupted, and the long metal staff she had brought had kept its mirror finish. With no reason to delay announcing her presence any longer, she projected a telepathic message in the direction of the city."*I am Sailor Mercury, Empress of the Avatar Islands,"*she introduced herself.

Ahead, a bridge led over the river, straight towards one set of city gates. The travelers on it froze in mid-step, and an ox bumped into the cart before it when its wagoner failed to pay any attention to it. Sudden silence descended on the city as conversations stopped and workers paused in mid-motion. Wide-eyed, the inhabitants searched for the source of the message or ran for cover.

Ami regretted frightening the civilians, but people had already died in this conflict, and more would die if she didn't hurry and gain the initiative. Besides, the distinction between soldiers and civilians was a fluent one when most of the dwarven military consisted of militia drafted fresh from their villages. "*Duke Libasheshtan, I have come to negotiate with you, as is my right as a fellow noble. I am waiting for*

*you on the rock needle jutting from the river upstream of the city walls," s*he continued.

There was a strangled scream from nearby. A fisherman, his face white as a sheet, stood in the water and gaped up at her. When he saw that she had noticed him, he gulped, gave a shallow bow and spun on his heel. Water sloshed around his boots as he sprinted towards the shore, screaming the whole way. He stumbled twice on loose stones as he scrambled up the river's bank and disappeared between the bushes, still screaming.

He wasn't the only one who had seen her. Ahead on the bridge, the travelers were running toward the city gates, leaving wagons and animals behind. Above them on the walls, more and more bearded faces appeared between the crenelations. Guards pointed in her direction, drawing the attention of those who hadn't spotted her yet. Belatedly, alarm bells started to ring.

As usual, Ami felt uncomfortable with so many people watching her every move. She tried to concentrate on the bright side. With so many eyes on her, she would have nothing to fear from the corruption. "*Should you refuse to meet me before noon, I will be forced to seek you out instead,"* she finished her message, giving the Duke some incentive to cooperate.

From the crenelations, a single bolt arced through the air and splashed into the river before making it even half-way towards her location. The shot wasn't part of a coordinated effort, and the dwarf who had fired it didn't try again, but it was representative of the kind of response Ami expected to her ultimatum.

It would be a nice surprise if the Duke agreed to negotiations, and she would happily take the opportunity if it presented itself, but she didn't really believe it would happen. Nevertheless, giving diplomacy a final chance didn't cost her anything at this point. Her plan to force a meeting was anything but subtle, and she could use the wait to prepare.

In a run-down part of the city, a well-fed and comparatively clean rat hid within a garbage pit from the alley cats above. The animal didn't notice when the light, already dim due to the two-story buildings

looming above, dimmed further. A cold, clammy fog expanded from a spot just above the cobblestones, creeping outwards at a sedate pace. Soon, an imp materialised from motes of green light, their glow hidden by the mist. A moment later, the rat had company down in the garbage pit, and the sound of digging rang out, dampened by the magical fog.

Kivith's footsteps echoed through the hall as he hurried towards his master, his cheeks burning with shame. With every step, the wet cloth of his apprentice robes slapped against his shins, reminding him that it was stained with bright yellow liquid. Normally, he wouldn't have cared – potion accidents happened – but today, his master stood at the massive gilded table seating most of the Duchy's highest nobles.

At its head, duke Libasheshtan himself sat on a large oaken throne inlaid with enough gold and silver to hide most of the wood underneath. He had donned gleaming armour, and with his short, smooth black beard and determined expression, he looked as if one of the statues of ancient heroes had come alive.

To his right, countess Zasod looked radiant as ever despite the frown on her face. She was wearing a plain and practical breastplate instead of the more form-fitting ceremonial ones she preferred.

Finally, count Zatkel sat opposite her, to the Duke's right. The count's fingers were constantly in motion as he moved beads on an abacus and jotted down notes, which he passed to the barons and command officers sitting further down the table.

All the splendour assembled around the table made Kivith doubly aware of his own filthy appearance. Approaching the assembled nobles like this was like something out of a nightmare! This was all the Dark Empress' fault for startling him with her message while he was brewing.

His master, the court wizard Mengolin, shot him an impatient look from where he stood beside the Duke's throne.

Kivith swallowed and increased his pace, which had slowed to a crawl without him noticing. The covered crystal ball he was balancing on a small padded tablet suddenly felt very heavy in his arms as he took position at Mengolin's side. "It's her," he delivered the news, his words sounding like a squeaky whimper. Biting his lips, he cast furtive glance at the arguing nobles, hoping they hadn't heard him.

His master lifted the black cloth covering the crystal ball just long enough to verify that it showed the river and part of the city. He nodded and knocked with the bottom of his staff against the floor thrice. All faces turned towards him. "It is confirmed, proven by the divinations," he announced. "The Dark Empress is indeed personally present."

There were gasps and frowns around the table.

One of the barons jumped to his feet. "We must evacuate the-"

"Are we safe-" another began at the same time.

"My men! I have to-" a third shouted without paying attention to his peers.

"We must smite the monster!"

Despite the danger of the situation, Kivith felt relief at the barons' reaction. Everybody was too excited to pay attention to him, the bringer of bad news. It was petty, but he really couldn't afford to make a poor impression on the movers and shakers of the Duchy. He was, to put it mildly, not the most promising of master Mengolin's apprentices. In fact, he had probably been specifically tasked with scrying on the Dark Empress for that exact reason. He was expendable.

Duke Libasheshtan raised his hand. "Quiet. Cease the useless chatter," he commanded, his voice cutting through the noise.

Immediately, the assembled dwarfs fell quiet and looked at him expectantly.

"Yes, that insolent Keeper is here. This changes what, exactly?" he

challenged. "She's stuck on the surface, and our citizens are already retreating underground. There's no reason for alarm."

In the privacy of his own mind, Kivith disagreed. The Dark Empress being close enough to rain spells down on the city was very, very alarming indeed. He was glad he was currently in one of the most arcanely protected chambers in the city, even if he felt guilty about doubting the Duke.

"She wants us to overreact in order to disrupt our war preparations," duke Libasheshtan continued. "But seriously, what do you expect her to do? Throw a tantrum and attack us all on her own?"

"Your Grace, she threatened to come after you," countess Zasod cautioned.

"She hasn't brought an army to even make the attempt," duke Libasheshtan said calmly. "Unless one of you has learned something new in the meantime?" he addressed the seated dwarfs.

The nobles turned towards their own court wizards, who were waiting at their side. These senior magicians, easily recognised by the jewelled tabards they wore over their robes, in turn looked towards the back of the hall, to the place Kivith had come from earlier.

In the shadow of ornate stone bookshelves, groups of apprentices were linking hands, working together to mitigate the strain of operating their scrying devices and divination bowls. The youngest member of each group had the duty of keeping an eye on the war council in case their masters wanted to give them new instructions.

These young dwarfs, upon seeing their masters' hand signals, rushed over with long lists of locations and scrying results. Even the children among them were well-dressed and clean, much to Kivith's chagrin.

"So, it seems that there is no trace of an enemy army anywhere within the vicinity of this city," duke Libasheshtan summarised after the wizards had delivered their reports. "Oh, wizard Likotrab?"

A brown-haired dwarf standing behind one of the barons straightened, his expression worried.

"Good thinking checking the bottom of the river. Very thorough," the Duke complimented, and the magician bowed with a proud smile on this face.

"Your Grace?" one of the officers at the far end of the table spoke up. "Some traders reported goblins in the east, near the village of Calmstone."

"Known quantity. We have reports from the area going three weeks past," count Zatkel interjected, not looking up from his abacus. "Additional guards were deployed eighteen days ago."

The officer who had brought the issue to attention nodded and sat down.

"Right. As I said, no traces of an enemy army," Duke Libasheshtan stated with satisfaction. "Still, let us be thorough. Count Ornish."

"Yes, your Grace?" count Ornish wasn't physically present, but a grey-bearded wizard sat in his throne, operating a crystal ball. The Count's voice had come from the orb, which showed his face. It did not show any of his three barons, however, and the three thrones reserved for them at the table remained vacant.

"Have you or your men noticed any signs that Keeper Mercury is moving troops?"

"Her flying vessels keep landing and departing from the tower, but they are not travelling towards Salthalls," count Cornish answered. "I cannot completely exclude some treachery, but they appear to only have small crews when they depart."

"Ah, yes, those things," the Duke said with displeasure.

Flying vessels? Kivith had never heard of them before. He shuddered. How could one even defend against flying raiders? He was suddenly glad his parents didn't live in one of the hamlets out in the countryside.

Paper rustled as Count Zatkel consulted his notes. "There have been no records of these so-called airships either here or in the neighbouring baronies," he said after only an instant of hesitation.

"Glad to hear it," count Ornish said from the crystal ball. "Your Grace, if the Dark Empress is currently distracted, then perhaps now is the time to launch an attack? We have been preparing spells to detect nearby ghosts, and-"

Kivith's master grimaced and shook his head, but the Duke wasn't looking at him. Nevertheless, his next words confirmed that he shared his court wizard's opinion. "Nonsense, distance doesn't stop Keepers from managing their dungeons."

"It doesn't?" Ornish sounded surprised and horrified.

"Indeed not. You stay right where you are, keep your men safe and the enemy contained. I'm still not convinced this entire farce of an ultimatum isn't just another attempt to goad you into attacking. She knows she needs to defeat our forces in detail if she wants to have a slight chance at winning, so we deny her the opportunity."

"As you wish, your Grace," count Ornish said. He didn't sound disappointed at all about not having to lead an assault.

"Good." Duke Libasheshtan looked at the two rows of faces down the table. "I think it's safe to say that our enemy cannot attack the city unless she wants to do so all by herself." He chuckled into his beard.

"But, but what if she does?" a nervous voice asked from among the barons. "She defeated the Avatar, so why wouldn't-"

Duke Libasheshtan snorted. "There is a *slight* difference between her defeating a single strong opponent in her own dungeon, surrounded by her loyal minions, and between attacking an enemy stronghold filled with thousands of soldiers all on her own. Nevertheless, if she wants to try," he rose from his throne and slammed his palms on the table, "then we'll make her pay for her overconfidence!"

Through the thin cloud cover, the sun was visible as a bright disk as it neared its highest position in the sky.

"*Doesn't look as if the Duke is going to show up,"* Cathy spoke telepathically in Ami's head. *"Also, they are loading a nasty-looking bolt into that ballista on the right tower."*

Ami took a moment to zoom in on the red-glowing tracery on the arrow-shaped piece of metal. It reminded her of some of the curses described in her library's darker tomes. Surprising to see here, but the effects would probably be limited to the body she was possessing. She still didn't intend on letting it hit her. *"I have seen it,"* she replied.

"*So you are really planning to go through with this?"* Cathy asked.

"*I have to,"* Ami replied *"I won't let this conflict consume any more lives if there's anything I can do to stop it!"* If that meant that she had to fight her way to the enemy leader to personally drag him to the negotiation table, well, so be it.

Cathy sighed. *"Well, I hope you can pull it off. Even then, I doubt the Duke will be reasonable."*

If he wasn't – well, she would take him prisoner and talk to his replacement. She was sure that if she demonstrated a few times that she could get to any noble she wanted, then one of them would eventually be willing to negotiate.

The more pessimistic part of her wondered if that would happen before or after the dwarven army was rendered non-functional due to lack of leaders.

"*I will, at least, give the dwarfs a reason to hold off on attacking me,"* Ami replied. Intimidation was one reason why she wouldn't be trying the subtle approach – this was intended as a show of force. The other reason was that she didn't have enough information about the city for a stealthier approach.

"*Your Majesty,"* Torian's slimy mind-voice intruded on her thoughts.

"The preparations on our side are ready. I have personally made sure to brief each and every warlock on his role in this operation."

"*Thank you. Stand by and wait for my signal,"* Ami answered. She hadn't been idle while waiting either. The dwarven wards that stopped spells from forming would seriously hamper her combat capabilities, and so she had filled her Keeper storage with already finished spells to bypass that problem. She had personally guided individual rats deeper into the city so she had minions to possess if she needed a quick escape. Under the cover of Shabon Spray, she had even been able to sneak some imps past the alarm wards.

Movement on the wall demanded her attention. The huge ballista was swivelling in her direction, the dwarfs manning it cranking small winches to make minor adjustments. According to Ami's visor, the bolt was accurately aimed and would hit either her or the rock she was standing on even without magical guidance.

She quickly checked the position of the sun. Noon. The time limit she had set had passed, so she could just start moving and avoid the coming shot. Simple and easy. But would it send the right message? She was supposed to make the dwarfs believe that she could easily shrug off their best efforts to stop her.

On the tower, a dwarf with purple trim around his helmet brought his open hand down in a hacking motion. The ballista fired, jerking backwards from the recoil as it catapulted the long chunk of sharpened metal towards its target.

The bolt whistled as it shot through the air, going too fast to easily catch it.

Ami, however, already knew the arc it would be travelling on to reach her. She put her Keeper hand in its path, pulling conjured icy gravel from storage to turn it into a physical barrier.

The shot hit the obstacle and passed through it too fast for Ami to grab a hold of the bolt. Her eyes widened fractionally as the shot continued towards her. She'd have to hope her shield would be enough to-

A geyser of hissing water shot up in front of her as the bolt hit the river, slowed down from the mid-air collision enough that it failed to reach its intended target. Underneath the stream's rippling surface, red lights flashed like some kind of underwater thunderstorm.

Even from several meters above it, Ami felt the hostile magic pull on her body, making her fake skin feel both numb and cold. She saw some unfortunate fishes drift to the surface upside-down and hoped that the dwarfs wouldn't be willing to use such dangerous magic within their own city.

The spray of water before her collapsed back into itself, revealing to the defenders on the wall that she hadn't moved at all. Which hopefully looked like confidence in her defences to them, rather than reacting too late to an only partially successful attempt at intercepting their attack. In any case, Ami wasn't about to give them time to think about the situation.

She raised her staff with an exaggerated and superfluous motion. The weapon was a long metal rod with a decorative blue gem on each end. While it could be used for magical purposes, she had brought it mainly to have a melee weapon that was about the same size and weight as a greatsword, but far less lethal. Waving it around was pure theatrics to give the dwarfs advance warning about her counterattack.

High above the tower, above the range of the wards, wisps of green mana crackled and coalesced into a swirl of spiralling bubbles. The ballista operators looked up at the phenomenon that had appeared right above them and immediately decided to jump off their siege engine and run.

Ami waved her staff downwards, and her remotely-cast Shabon Spray Freezing compressed itself into a huge icicle. Gravity did the rest, and she could hear the noise of splintering wood and the dismayed cries of the dwarfs all the way out here on her tiny island.

She nodded to herself as she surveyed the ice-covered remains of the mechanism. Swift, flashy retaliation without casualties. *"The operation begins now,"* she sent a message to her dungeon and launched herself high into the air. Wind whistled past her ears and

her cloak rustled behind her as her arc carried her closer to the city.
"Give me the location of Duke Libasheshtan!"

Last edited: Sep 25, 2016

The Upper City

Ami hurtled through the air, following the river downstream towards the city. She didn't have to worry about the dwarfs with crossbows behind the battlements, as she was moving too fast for them to hit her at this distance. Of course, she couldn't jump far enough to reach the city in a single leap and soon descended towards the surface of the river.

As she approached her mirror image on the water below, she crossed her arms before thrusting them forward, and fired a burst of blue-glowing bubbles right at her predicted landing spot. An instant later, the ice of the newly-created platform cracked from the impact of her boots. She jumped off again before the ice floe could dip underwater, the recoil making it bob like a cork on the waves.

Leapfrogging across frozen platforms, she neared the wall. She was already staring up at the fortifications before its defenders could gather. The battlements loomed above her like a toothy horizon, and a few helmeted heads were visible against the backdrop of the sky. She could hear terse orders from above as well as the cranking noises of crossbows being reloaded.

From this point on, she would have to be wary of wards making her spellcasting unreliable, so it was as good an opportunity as any to show off.

A metal bolt buried itself into the ice at her feet as she paused on the last ice platform. The shooter ducked back into cover while others leaned around the battlements and took aim.

She released the power she had been building up for an extra-strong underwater Shabon Spray Freezing. Ice exploded upwards from beneath her, blossoming out into a jagged, tree-sized spire. She let the surfacing ice carry her higher, muscles tensing in preparation.

The mass of ice below her slowed, and she catapulted herself high into the air. Briefly, she came face to face with a wide-eyed dwarf as

she passed him on the way up. He yelped and threw himself backwards, tracking her even as she vaulted over the battlements.

Immediately, she felt an odd resistance in the air that tried to fling her back. Her own magic pushed against it, and she tore her way through the invisible obstacle as if she was ripping a path through spider webs.

With a hiss followed by a loud pop, a protective rune that had been carved into the stone burst apart and caught fire. The resistance decreased, and a weird warbling alarm started howling as more runes lit up.

Having arrived on top of the wall, she took stock of the situation.

The nearby dwarfs were dropping their crossbows and pulling their swords, but most of the guards were still spread out along the wall and rushing towards her position. The ones already close to her were paling, their steps faltering and their gazes flitting back and forth between her and the wards placed in regular intervals along the wall.

She figured that the little symbols were not supposed to be smoking, melting, or exploding into splinters. It didn't take a genius to realise that they were suffering a crushing defeat in the struggle to keep her out.

There was a metallic scraping noise behind her. The dwarf she had jumped past was still on his back, crawling away from her by pushing himself with his hands and feet. Reflected in the shiny metal of his breastplate, she saw a shadowy figure with burning red eyes, wreathed in a corona of writhing dark energy.

If she looked like that while her magic fought against the wards, then it was no wonder that he was backing away, oblivious to the danger of falling into the river.

She couldn't just let him drown, so she had to stop him before he went over the edge. Hitting him with her staff would just push him farther. Could she use magic? He was wearing one of the chain belts that stopped spells from forming, but there was no ceiling

above them and she was a Keeper. Her spells didn't have to originate from her own body. In the secrecy of her own mind, she apologised to him as a bolt of blue bubbles fell from the sky and trapped his legs under a sheet of ice.

"Monob! No!" one of the dwarfs surrounding her yelled in dismay, prompted into action by the sudden attack. Foregoing caution, he charged straight at Ami.

The soldier behind him lunged at his back. "Down you fool!" he warned as he tackled him to the ground.

The second bolt of freezing magic from high above struck the floor close enough to frost over both of the prone soldiers' beards.

Ami kept up her suppressive fire, raining weak Shabon Spray Freezing spells down onto the walls.

The nearest dwarfs scattered. Those advancing on her from farther away didn't stop, but they were moving considerably slower with their shields held over their heads, trying to watch both the sky and their step simultaneously.

She figured that she had a few seconds before her opponents got organised enough to attack her seriously. "*The Duke?"* she mentally asked Torian.

"*Crystal ball seven is straight above, eight to twelve provide additional angles,"* the chief warlock replied.

She stepped behind one of the stalagmite-like mounds of ice created by her bombardment. Protected from the sporadic crossbow bolts coming her way, she focused on her Keeper sight.

Back in her dungeon, the warlocks were assembled in a large room, sitting at desks and staring into crystal balls. Torian was striding through the rows like a teacher supervising class during an exam, hands behind his back and a strict expression on his face.

It wasn't hard to locate the orbs he had indicated, even without reading the large number affixed to each scrying station. The crystal balls in question stood out among the others because they were

much more colourful, showing the surface rather than some dark underground place.

The crystal ball with the number seven displayed a pointed roof covered in slate shingles, with no distinguishing features that would allow Ami to tell it apart from the surrounding roofs. The other orbs showed the same house from different perspectives.

She was glad they all agreed on the same target. Finding someone underground was not trivial, and in this first phase, her warlocks had scryed on Duke Libasheshtan and then moved the viewpoint straight upwards until they could see the city. He was definitely somewhere below the shown building.

Unfortunately, that knowledge wasn't immediately useful. She still had to *find* said building in the unfamiliar city.

She swept her gaze over the sea of roofs and façades that expanded before her. Within moments, she spotted groups of angry dwarfs bearing down on her location, but not her real quarry. Her viewing angle was too shallow to see past the other buildings and the occasional trees.

"*Turn the view toward the river, please,"* she mentally addressed one of the warlocks directly.

The greasy-heared man jumped in his chair and let out a surprised gasp. "Of course, your Majesty!" he said aloud, drawing interested glances from the other warlocks. In his haste to comply with her orders, he almost knocked the crystal ball from its socket as he reached for it. Nevertheless, he managed to bring the river-side part of the wall into view almost as soon as his fingers touched the device.

Ami had no difficulty figuring out her own location in the crystal ball. All she had to do was look at the section of the wall being struck by a hail of aquamarine meteors. Among the glittering mounds of ice left behind by her bombardment, she could see herself as a tiny but still distinguishable silhouette. Holding out her staff horizontally, she rotated on her spot like a compass needle until it was pointing straight at the crystal ball.

Now she had a direction, a rough distance, and a troop of pursuers out for her blood. It was time to start moving towards the imp closest to that location.

The dwarves were poorly prepared for dealing with a fast invader who could jump from rooftop to rooftop, bypassing the streets below.

"After her!" a frustrated voice shouted as Ami crossed a gap between buildings. Behind her, a roadblock that looked like a solid double row of shields and spears dissolved into its component dwarfs. They demonstrated impressive discipline by fluidly recreating their formation so that it was now facing her.

It was too bad for them that she was already two rooftops away when they started jogging after her, still in lockstep.

She skidded down the steep incline of a roof, grabbed onto a chimney with her left hand, and swung around it to change direction. Two iron bolts plinked against the square structure, nicking the smoothly polished stone.

The dwarfs were trying to adapt to her approach. The two snipers who had almost hit her were lying on neighbouring rooftops. One of them got handed a loaded crossbow while she glanced over, and he immediately started taking aim again.

Ami suppressed a flinch as another whistling projectile actually managed to brush past her hair. Being shot at was unnerving even if she knew that the worst she had to fear was punctured fake skin.

Unfortunately, the hail of bolts was growing denser and more distracting. Almost all of the groups of armoured dwarves in the alleys below were carrying ladders now. Ever-increasing numbers of the short, stout figures appeared on top of the surrounding buildings, ready to fight her.

Ami alighted on the gable of another roof, only to find it already occupied.

"H-halt, intruder!" a dwarf in leather armour shouted, waving his

sword at her. He had one foot on the rain drain and the other leg bent at an uncomfortable angle so that he was leaning with his hip against the roof's incline. His left hand clawed at the roof shingles as if his life depended on it while he awkwardly wobbled towards her.

Balancing easily on top of the gable, she shot him a pitying look as she walked past. If that was a representative example of the dwarven ability to engage her up here, then she mostly had to worry about them accidentally falling off the roof.

Sudden pain flared in the back of her head as something sharp struck her from behind.

She spread her arms as she almost lost her footing from the unexpected push and barely managed to suppress a surprised squawk. Nevertheless, a loud cheer rose from the dwarfs who had seen her stumble, echoing through the neighbourhood.

Well, it was inevitable that some bolt would hit her eventually, Ami thought. The spot where the bolt had bounced off hurt a little, but she didn't give in to the urge to poke at it. Perhaps protecting herself with a magical shield would be worth it, now that she was approaching her destination? There were too many dwarfs with warding chains nearby to cast a shield targeted at herself, but she had a good number of them in Keeper storage. Unfortunately, they deteriorated quickly when she pulled them out again because they weren't meant to be disconnected from a mana source for even an instant.

Better to save them for when she needed them. Concentrating briefly, she hurled a burst of bubbles from the sky at her own location. Fog crept outwards, covering the roof like a blanket before rolling off its edges like a wispy avalanche. She followed the mist to the streets below, dropping onto the cobblestone road with barely any noise.

"What's going on?" a dwarf asked, his head moving jerkily as he looked around. "Where are you? Anyone?"

Ami had landed so close to him that she could have touched his back if she reached out with her arm and leaned forward. Instead,

she pressed herself against the wall of the building and crab-walked sideways.

"Cease fire! Stop shooting right now!" a different dwarf bellowed, both arms raised high. "You are going to hit your comrades like this!"

"S-sir, I can barely feel the ground beneath my feet!" the soldier standing right next to him whined, a complaint that was echoed by those next in line to him.

"Watch out, she's up there!" a frightened voice shouted.

"Where? I can't see anything!"

"Up there! Right there!" The soldier who had given the warning pointed to a first storey balcony with his whole arm, where a flag fluttered in the breeze.

"Give proper directions, soldier! We can't see you pointing!" the commanding officer said, keeping most of the unease his face showed from seeping into his tone.

Ami, being able to see through the fog clearly, kept away from the soldiers who were instinctively huddling closer together for protection. With the way they were acting, they would only find her with sheer dumb luck. "*Cathy, this feels too easy,"* she sent a message back to her dungeon. "*Have you noticed something I'm missing?"*

"*Looks to me as if they are throwing green troops at you and hope they get lucky,"* the swordswoman replied. "*Not as many as they could, either. They are keeping most of the troops on the surface in reserve near that area the crystal balls can't see."*

"*The entrance to the city below,"* Ami clarified. Smoothed cliff faces formed a funnel pointed directly at the gate, allowing the defenders to rain death on invaders from the arrow slits above. Since she hadn't brought an invasion force, the obstacle most relevant to her was the wide ramp leading down and passing straight through a temple of the Light. Her skin crawled at the mere thought of trying to move through the towering steel doors, currently open in order to

admit the last of the city's civilians to safety.

She wondered if the evacuation of the citizens meant that the surface parts of the settlement were considered expendable. To her, its architecture seemed as if it was meant to last while also being pleasant to look at. Even the façades of the simplest dwellings used blocks of different sizes and colours to create decorative patterns, and geometric engravings embellished the more elaborate buildings.

Under less hostile circumstances, she would have stopped and taken some time to give her surroundings the attention they deserved. In particular, the recurring motif of overlapping squares and cubes in repeating, complex arrangements made her curious. Perhaps she would get an opportunity to appreciate them at a later date, when the current conflict was resolved.

"That way, Sir!" one of the dwarfs in higher-quality armour said, holding something red-glowing with a set of pliers that was pointing straight at Ami. The closer he got to her, the more the glow shifted into orange, and a mild force started pushing against her.

With the bright light of the overstrained ward to guide them, a dozen or so soldiers were actually managing to establish a wide perimeter around her.

Ami frowned and drew on the darker portions of her mana supply, as if she was preparing to cast a corrupted version of one of her spells.

In reaction, the symbol flared up bright and exploded. The tongs went flying, and their wielder yelped in surprise as sharp shards pinged off his armour. Eyes wide, he ducked behind his shield even as his comrades asked him what happened.

Hidden in the mist, she darted past the frightened soldiers who were trying to spot her through the grey, billowing clouds. Her destination was an oak tree, surrounded by a few benches and small flower beds. She hopped up on top of a low-hanging branch where nobody would accidentally bump into her.

"*Torian, I am about to spread the lights,"* she informed her chief warlock. "I want to know the location of the shallowest non-warded

rooms and the position of Duke Libashestan as soon as possible."

"*As you wish,"* Torian sent back. In her Keeper sight, she saw him bow reflexively before he relayed her orders to the assembled warlocks.

She dismissed the image and closed her eyes, focusing her attention on listening to the underground. With all of the soldiers and civilians rushing about, the tolling of the bells, and the howling of the alarm wards, she wouldn't have been able to make out any details even if she tried. Instead, she searched for echoes and let them guide her to zones where the sound wasn't dampened by earth and rock.

With no need for subtlety, she immediately began casting spells at any hollow underground areas she uncovered. The vast majority of her workings disappeared without a trace, their effects crushed by dwarven wards just as thoroughly as if she had directed them into solid stone.

She didn't let the failures deter her and kept up her rapid-fire casting, placing her spells at random instead of painstakingly searching for weak points. The dwarven city was too big to protect every single part of it, and occasionally, she felt one of her spells turn into a cherry-sized sphere of light.

"*We are getting something now,"* Torian informed her cheerfully.

The warlocks back at the dungeon were waving their hands rapidly over their crystal balls as they ran search patterns underground, trying to find the chambers Ami had revealed before some dwarf wizards could come and snuff out the lights.

One of the scrying devices went dark, and the warlock glaring at it slammed his fist onto the desk. "A bucket? Seriously?" He rose from his chair and called out to Torian "Hey, tell the Empress that she needs to make the light spells larger! Those midgets are putting stuff over them!"

"*Your Majest-"*

"*I heard him, Torian,"* Ami answered immediately. Admittedly, placing containers over her light sources was a pragmatic way for even non-wizards to render her light sources useless. She could compensate for this easily enough, but she wasn't too happy about having to switch to creating glowing spheres the size of her torso. The increased power requirements were an inconvenience at worst, but it was harder for larger spells to fit into gaps between wards.

"*We still don't have a visual on the Duke, but he is between the orange and the blue lights,"* Torian reported.

"*Good. Keep me informed if he moves,"* Ami ordered. She was deploying her lights in differently-coloured layers to indicate depth, and now she knew where she needed to go. She programmed the Duke's estimated coordinates into her palmtop computer.

A small green marker appeared on her visor, along with an estimated distance. She turned her head to look at the soldiers rushing past her tree, and the indicator remained stationary relative to its surroundings. Now certain that she would be able to track her target even if she got turned around in labyrinthine underground tunnels, she focused on her dungeon once more.

She smiled at the sight of several crystal balls shining in tones she had used near the surface. "*Torian, which of the cyan or white lights are closest to my current position?"*

"*That would be number twenty-four,"* the chief warlock replied as he glanced over at a large, window-shaped scrying device that showed the entire city straight from above. Imps were moving little numbers across its surface, indicating which part the corresponding crystal ball was looking at. A small Mercury symbol marked Ami's own location, right in the middle of the cloud of fog that had swallowed a city block.

"*It looks suitable,"* she decided. She left her hiding spot to find the imp she had hidden nearby, her progress largely unimpeded by the dwarven soldiers. There were fewer of them around for her to avoid simply because those who found the edges of her fog were reluctant to re-enter it.

Soon, she reached a well surrounded by a low wall, with a bucket on a chain just waiting to be lowered. She pushed it aside so she had room to slip into the gaping hole. Air rushed past her as she dropped into the darkness, growing colder the closer she got to the bottom.

She struck the water feet-first and pushed through its surface like a dart, only slightly slowed by the impact. Fully submerged, she continued descending until her boots touched solid ground. Despite passing through the water, she was still going fast enough that the landing would have broken her legs if she hadn't been transformed. Rising from her crouch, she searched the unworked rock all around her for an opening.

Above her, hidden just below the surface of the clear water, the wall had a dark hole. Its irregular edges showed that it had been dug out in a hurry. Understandable, since the imp she had tasked with the job would have had to come up for air regularly.

She swam up and squeezed herself into the narrow tunnel, wishing that the imp had at least taken the time to make it large enough to crawl on all fours. Instead, she had to wriggle her way through the entrance like some kind of caterpillar. Then her staff, too rigid to bend, wedged itself against a shallow notch. She almost got stuck and was glad it was too dark for anyone to scry on her. Was the imp farther down the tunnel snickering at her?

With a few contortions and a lot of brute force, she managed to clear the narrow entrance and emerged from the water. The rough corridor was tall enough for her to stand, barely. With her visor's night vision mode, she could see its uneven ceiling only in monochrome tones, which was enough to avoid bumping her head.

Her imp was waiting for her with a grumpy expression, standing in a puddle of water that had dripped down from her wet overall. A trail of puddles led to a pond at the other end of the tunnel, wider than the well. The little worker tapped her mining pick against the ground, watching Ami through half-lidded eyes.

Ami could understand that her worker was feeling impatient. With water closing off both ends of the corridor and no connection to a dungeon heart, the oxygen in the air would be depleted eventually.

Sure, an enchanted mining pick could produce more while digging, but she doubted her imp was smart enough to think of that on her own.

On second thought, the imp was probably just irritated at getting orders she couldn't complete because there was a layer of groundwater-conducting rock in the way.

Ami briefly wondered why the dwarfs were fine with living underneath an aquifer. Perhaps the added protection from digging invaders was worth dealing with a constantly leaking ceiling? Then again, for all she knew the bedrock could be impermeable. In any case, she needed to reach the city, and her imp couldn't work in a water-filled pit.

Fortunately, the bulbous-eyed creature could dig through ice with no trouble.

With Ami's frost spells keeping the water out, the imp was able to mine a steep shaft through the aquifer, towards the chamber her warlocks had indicated.

Ami walked right behind her, a little surprised at the depth of the wet layer. It came as welcome relief when water finally stopped seeping from the walls and she no longer needed to cover them in a layer of ice.

With a quick gesture, a Shabon Spray Freezing shot from her hands and blocked the passage behind her from floor to ceiling. She focused on calling up more power and struck the section behind the ice wall repeatedly with Keeper lightning.

Steam hissed and rock liquefied under the repeated attacks, its red glow visible even through the thick ice.

She only stopped when she was sure that the way she had come was now sealed with a water-proof plug of solidified lava. While she was willing to bet that the dwarfs had protected themselves with floodgates against water-related accidents, she wasn't going to risk their lives unnecessarily.

Her imp had kept digging deeper and deeper into the bedrock. She was now letting out an unhappy squeal with every furious strike of her pick.

Walking closer, Ami spotted the problem. Sparks flew whenever the metal tool struck stone, and progress had slowed to a crawl. Not as much as if the imp was trying to shatter a fortified dungeon wall, but still enough to hint at magical defences. She was reminded of the dwarven railways constructed from reinforced stone.

"*Your Majesty? Dwarven soldiers are pouring into the chamber you designated as your ingress point,"* Torian messaged her.

"*Thanks for the warning,"* she sent back. Her imp's digging hadn't exactly been quiet, but she still had hoped to avoid serious fighting for a while longer. Well, too late to change things now. She transported the imp to some neutral meadows outside the city and focused on her magic.

With a resigned sigh, she slammed the bottom of her staff into the ground. The hardened stone shuddered, cracks spreading outwards as the quaking intensified. With a thunderous groan, the floor crumbled below her, and she fell towards a forest of raised spears.

Making an Entrance

For a dwarf, a spider web of cracks appearing on the ceiling above was one of the scariest things in the world.

Medtob's breath hitched, his muscles tensing for a desperate sprint. Each fibre of his body screamed at him to run; to get away before the cave-in crushed him under tons of rubble. He didn't though, because there was no way out. Standing shoulder to shoulder with his fellow soldiers, he had no room to manoeuvre.

All around him, there was an oddly synchronised metallic rustle as his comrades flinched, having reached the same realization.

Uttering a desperate prayer, he raised his shield and braced for impact.

The cracks in the worked stone above now spanned the entire width of the underground road. As the shaking intensified, dust and small pebbles cascaded into the room, and the sphere of magical light above grew dim.

To Medtob, it looked like the sun disappearing behind clouds.

The ceiling burst into pieces like a smashed plate, turning into a hail of shards and gravel. Solid stone turned into a chaotic avalanche of dust and debris, blotting out the remaining light on the way down.

With terrified resignation, he saw that the biggest shadow was coming straight at him. Reflexively, he ducked and closed his eyes, but somehow, he managed to keep his spear steady. If he was going to die, he was going to die doing his duty-

Pain flared in his wrist as a blow struck his kite shield, forcing his arm lower. The metal rang so loudly he almost couldn't hear the clangs and impacts all around him, though he didn't miss his neighbour screaming in pain and staggering against him.

He fought to maintain his balance, jostling his other neighbour by

accident. Surprised to be still alive, he opened one eye.

Right in front of him, someone took a rock to the helmet and went down. Soldiers were yelling, but he couldn't understand anything due to the deafening noise of the stone hail pinging off armour.

A new impact on his shoulder drove him to one knee, and he almost dropped his spear when something pushed against it. There was a horrible, high pitched scraping noise right next to his ear as piled-up debris slid down his shield, and he clenched his teeth in discomfort.

How was he still alive? He had seen that shape above him. It had been larger than him and should have squished him into mangled paste. Not that he was questioning his good fortune, but his survival was nothing less than a miracle.

The room got brighter; the noise diminishing to a patter like hail on sheet metal.

Figuring that all the big pieces had already come down, Medtob dared to peek out from underneath his shield.

Everything looked greyish-white, covered by a blanket of dust. Many of the soldiers around him were on the ground or on their knees, coughing and groaning, but just as many were still standing.

His throat burned from the dust particles hanging heavily in the air, and there was weight pressing against his spear. He looked up.

Crimson eyes glared down at him.

He flinched back, a hoarse shriek escaping from his throat even as his back collided with the soldier behind him.

The Dark Empress herself was floating above him, her blue and black garb untouched by the dust. Wait, she wasn't flying. She was at the centre of a bubble-like shield that glowed purplish-blue where it rested on the spear tips below.

He and the surrounding dwarfs were effectively carrying her.

The bubble wobbled and rolled on the spears whenever they moved,

but it touched enough of them to avoid falling down. With every motion, the black cloak of the terrifying figure inside billowed.

He suddenly realised that the large shadow he had seen falling towards him must have been the Dark Empress, not a huge boulder. That explained why the impact hadn't squished him flat. She felt surprisingly light, even if he wasn't supporting her weight alone.

He risked a closer look, fully expecting her body to be living darkness or an animated skeleton or something at least as horrifying. Instead, he saw mostly boots and bare legs that belonged to a scrawny human girl.

If he survived this, he would surely be mortified about having looked up the skirt of an Empress. Right now though, he was too terrified to focus on anything but the danger he was in.

Such as the threat of the weapon she was wielding. She was holding the hefty staff horizontally, and it poked through her shield on both sides, so she could obviously use it to attack if she so desired. The massive thing had to account for a significant portion of the weight he was feeling and could probably punch through armour like a warhammer.

He needed to get rid of her before she killed him.

Instinctively, he looked for a vulnerable spot to stab. The only piece of armour she was wearing was that strange transparent visor dimming the glow of the crimson slits behind it. He wouldn't have to aim carefully at a weak point.

The insane noble's questionable choice of battle attire aside, he was pretty damn certain that just poking at her shield would not get him anywhere. Was there something else he could use against her?

Wait, she barely weighted anything, and he wasn't alone. "Comrades, quickly!" he shouted, his voice scratchy from inhaled dust.

The soldiers farther away turned to look at him, gravel and shavings flying out of beards. Those in range of the Dark Empress kept their

eyes glued on her, but their shifting posture indicated that they had heard him.

Keeper Mercury's red-glowing gaze was suddenly focused directly on him.

With a superhuman effort of will, he managed to continue without stammering. "Throw her! Now!" He didn't wait to see if the others would join him before he jumped at the bubble, slamming his shield into it.

With barely any hesitation, the others nearby followed his example. They didn't hit the magical shield all at exactly the same time, but every dwarf still managed to impart some momentum to the Dark Empress.

The hellish red pits that were her eyes widened as she was tossed back up in the air, the spherical barrier around her shimmering from the impacts.

Grinning, Medtob let out a whoop of satisfaction. Bouncing her around should buy everyone a moment to shake off the effects of the cave-in and let the officers come up with a way to breach her magical protections.

With a quiet gurgle, a giant, transparent hand appeared in mid-air. The ball containing the empress slammed into its palm, sending ripples across its surface.

Mouth agape, Medtob stared at the sphere caught between the fingers of the disembodied limb.

That- that had not been part of his plan. Were his eyes playing tricks on him, or was that a faint smile on the Dark Empress' lips?

"You made it worse," one of his neighbours breathed as the hand pushed down, propelling Empress Mercury straight back at them.

The glowing bubble smashed into Medtob much more forcefully than it had the first time.

He caught the impact diagonally on his shield and was shoved into

the dwarfs behind him, his efforts to brace himself utterly futile. Gasping as the air was driven from his lungs, he was pinned against the ranks behind him by the curved surface pressing down on him.

There was no room between the dwarfs to fit a sphere as large as the Empress' shield. The hand that kept pushing it downwards didn't care; it maintained a constant pressure and simply forced spears and dwarfs aside. A wave went through the dwarven formation as soldiers were shoved outwards and bumped against each other like dominoes.

Medtob feared that he would slowly be squeezed to death, caught between the transparent bubble and the armour of the soldiers behind him.

Suddenly, the resistance against his back disappeared. The dwarfs on the edge of the formation had fallen over or backed away, giving the deeper ranks enough space to do the same. He had never been so happy to land hard on his back before.

Pain in his legs reminded him that they remained pinned between the enemy and the ground. Above him, spears jabbed at the bubble from every direction, filling the space above his head like the bars of a cage.

Hope reinvigorated him as the shield started flickering from the constant attacks. The Dark Empress was turning her head rapidly as she looked around. Her last manoeuvre must have overstrained her defences.

Hurting, out of breath and prone on the floor, he looked for a way to pitch in. He had lost his spear, but the dagger at his waist remained a serviceable weapon. His hand was already on its sheath when he had a better idea.

Empress Mercury was holding her staff upright in a one-handed grip right now, and the bottom part poked out of her bubble. If he managed to get her weapon away from her just before her shield collapsed, then his allies would have a much easier time defeating her!

He whipped his upper body upwards into a seating position, bringing the unprotected length of metal into his reach. His hands closed around the cold haft of the weapon even as thoughts about curses, traps and lethal wards went through his mind.

He was honestly surprised when nothing terrible happened. Emboldened, he yanked on the staff with his entire weight, trying to get as much leverage as possible.

The weapon gave a little before the Dark Empress tightened her grip and looked down at him in surprise.

Until now, he had thought that her reputed power was an exaggeration. It was hard to believe the slender figure in front of him could be physically strong enough to fight a horned reaper. Now though, he was starting to worry she might simply rip out his arm.

At that moment, the giant hand on top of the sphere lost cohesion and turned into a flood that cascaded down and washed him away.

Ami had left her welcoming committee sprawled out in the cave-in's muddy rubble and was travelling down a wide underground road through the residential area she had dropped into.

Behind closed doors and shutters, families huddled together and tried to hide from her. Only the occasional sounds of crying infants being urgently shushed betrayed their presence. Farther away, rapid, retreating footsteps indicated that the civilians outside of Ami's line of sight were fleeing the area.

She kept moving at a normal pace to avoid catching up with them and causing a panic.

"That enemy formation was eight ranks wide and six deep," Torian informed Ami over their telepathic connection.

That meant her welcoming committee represented less than one percent of the military forces in the city. Its members wouldn't even be out of action for long, at least not all of them. They were good people just trying to protect their homes, so she hadn't hurt them

after scattering them. It had already been hard enough to simply leave those with broken bones and bleeding bruises behind, trusting their comrades to tend to their wounds. She didn't want to think of the damage she could have done if her quake spell hadn't been strong enough to reduce the pieces of falling ceiling into small chunks.

"Are they following me?" she asked.

"The effects of your magnificent black mist on the first fool who dared venture into it was quite sufficient to discourage pursuit," Torian answered, his words dripping with malicious joy.

She winced. Her corrupted Shabon Spray Freezing attacked sensory organs and was painful and debilitating. She felt pity for everyone who didn't know better and walked into the thick, stationary black clouds. Nevertheless, the spell was her best option for stopping enemy forces that could rapidly dig through physical obstacles.

"Warn me if more soldiers come my way," she replied, trying to keep her disgust at Torian's amusement out of her voice.

"Of course. That should not be a problem now that our opponents have stopped hiding."

Her chief warlock was referring to the lights that had turned back on, thin stone covers retracting to reveal glowing carvings behind them. The unexpected scraping noise and motion above had startled her at first, drawing her attention to the vaulted ceiling. There, between the criss-crossing support arches, glowing figurines of the sun and stars shone like lamps within recesses.

She didn't know for sure why the dwarfs had decided to stop obscuring her surroundings, but she could make a few informed guesses. The bracelet that warned her of foreign scrying was glowing constantly now, and she suspected that the dwarven mineral sense wasn't precise enough for fighting in the dark.

Tactical disadvantages aside, she was glad she could see her surroundings properly. She would have missed the interplay of

colours and shapes on the sculpted, painted façades if she had only seen them in night vision.

Her gaze slid over the fake pillars and support structures that defined the basic design of a façade, skipped over the engravings beside the door, and came to rest on the rectangular depression that seemed to serve as a front yard. In a sandbox littered with hastily-abandoned children's toys, she spotted a half-finished wooden figurine and a carving knife. Its grip was just the right size for the tiny hands of a toddler.

Wasn't that dangerous? She knew that dwarfs loved crafting, but she hadn't known they let children play with sharp tools. It was as much of a surprise as seeing the many plants growing from pots and alcoves almost everywhere. She had expected mushrooms, but these were real, green-leaved shrubs and flowers. Some even formed leafy curtains along the street, hanging down from pots suspended from the ceiling.

Which brought her right back to thinking about the lights. Green plants required strong, constant light to thrive, and the only light sources here were clearly magical. Where did they get their power from?

Her visor could detect mana flows moving through the architecture, guided by both engraved runes and crystalline arrangements. It couldn't tell her where the power was coming from more specifically than "from below", and neither did it provide any hints as to its source.

"Torian, tell one of the warlocks to investigate the lowest levels of the city. I want to know what's down there," she told him.

"Immediately, your Majesty."

Nervously, she wondered if the dwarfs had something like a dungeon heart somewhere within the city. She would never be able to catch Duke Libasheshtan if he had access to a Keeper transport analogue. It was unlikely, she tried to reassure herself. She would have spotted signs of corruption or of minion bonds. Besides, the output of the power source was – was…

She blinked as she realised she couldn't simply calculate an estimate in her mind. The mana was streaming in complicated patterns, often forming cycles that fed back into each other to recycle spilled power.

It was an intricate, efficient pattern that she was going to analyse and incorporate into her own dungeon once she got the time.

"Your Majesty? Unfortunately, the deepest parts of the city are insufficiently lit for a complete survey. They seem to mostly consist of labyrinthine mine shafts, magma, forges, and tombs," Torian reported.

She frowned and spared a moment to consult the notes he had jotted down. From a cursory glance, she got the impression of branching tunnels spreading through the underground like a root system, but there was nothing to suggest a central energy source.

Deciding to question Duke Libasheshtan about this mystery later, she turned left at an intersection, following the marker on her visor that indicated his last known location.

"Ah, your Majesty? Going that way will lead you to a checkpoint with fortified gates," Torian's voice interrupted her musings. *"A large force of soldiers including mages and priests is assembling there."*

Ami's fingers clenched tighter around her staff, but her steps didn't falter. She had known that some battles would be inevitable when she had come up with her plan. *"Thank you, I will prepare accordingly."*

The presence of priests was both worrisome and reassuring. On one hand, holy magic made her feel sick, but on the other, those healers could save people if she used too much force in the heat of battle.

Her standard precautions should be enough to deal with them. Since there were no soldiers with spellcasting-inhibiting wards nearby, she replaced her shield and concealed herself with a field of mist. There weren't any other types of wards currently affecting her either, so she could call in some reinforcements.

At her mental command, an imp wearing heavy gloves appeared from a twirl of green motes. Grinning, the worker upended the wriggling bag she was carrying and shook it, dumping a few rats at Ami's feet. The imp teleported back to the dungeon with a faint giggle before Ami could reprimand her about dropping the animals from such a height.

The scared rodents darted away towards the nearest safe-looking crevices and hid, which was exactly what Ami would have ordered them to do if she had gotten the chance.

Disagreeing with the imp's methods but satisfied with the outcome, Ami shook her head and continued on her way. It didn't take her long to reach a larger room where three roads met in front of the gate that her chief warlock had told her about.

He apparently hadn't considered the civilians stuck in front of the blocked passage worth mentioning.

There were about three dozen of them, breathing heavily, whimpering and looking around with wide, fearful eyes. Some of them were praying.

"T-t-the fog is coming!" A flour-stained man with cloth-wrapped beard and hair shouted, pointing in her direction.

Gasps and cries of fear went came from the crowd as its members turned to face her, pressing their backs against the wall. A little boy clutched the hands of his mother and started crying, while his younger sister hid behind her legs.

"No! Nooo!" A woman wearing embroidered leather robes shouted in a shrill, panicked voice. "Let us through! Please! Let us through!" she begged as she hammered her fists against the closed gate that was over four times her height.

The metal of the massive door didn't even budge enough to ring from the impacts. The woman's hands made muted, meaty thuds as they collided repeatedly with the unyielding surface, leaving red smears on it.

"Stop!" Ami shouted.

The civilian dwarfs flinched as her voice echoed in the sudden silence. They froze, keeping their limbs stock still except for uncontrollable shivering.

Ami froze too as she realised that all those pale-faced people were waiting for her to do something. She had only wanted the woman who had been striking the gate to stop hurting herself.

A droplet of blood dripped to the floor as the civilians waited, growing more afraid with each passing second.

Deciding on a course of action, she mentally tagged them as non-hostiles to let them see through her fog.

Eyes widened in horror and pupils contracted into tiny pinpricks as the dwarfs caught sight of her. Someone screamed, and a baby started crying in the arms of a broadly-built woman.

A wealthy-looking dwarf wearing a dark blue jacket over a frilly white shirt took a shaky step forward, placing himself in front of the group. He took off his ruby-topped beret and held it to his chest as he bowed deeply. "E-Empress Mercury, please-"

"Leave. I have no reason to harm you," Ami interrupted and swung her arm in what she hoped was an imperious manner towards the passage farthest from her own. "My business is with Duke Libasheshtan alone."

The man swallowed and bowed again. "Y-yes, of course. Thank you, your M-Majesty."

For a few seconds, the other just stared with their mouths open, as if they couldn't believe what they just heard. Some of the most courageous started moving, imitating the blue-wearing man as they bowed and thanked her. They moved hesitantly at first, shuffling sideways along the wall as they made sure to keep facing her.

It looked almost as if they were expecting her to shoot them in the back the moment they turned away. Ami felt rather awkward as some of them kept bowing in her direction every few steps.

The blue-dressed man glanced nervously at Ami before going back to approach a dwarven girl who remained paralysed with fear. He grabbed her by the arm and dragged her along, all the while watching Ami like a hawk.

She considered the locked gate once more and grew angry. Whoever had given the order to keep it closed had been willing to sacrifice these people just to buy some time. Intellectually, she understood that a fortified door that remained open when the enemy approached was useless, but she still hated that kind of disregard for the fate of the stragglers.

The retreating civilians ducked their heads and moved faster, and she realised that some of her emotions were showing on her face. Forcefully relaxing her features, she distracted herself by focusing on the obstacle instead.

The door was several meters tall and wide enough to drive two carts through it at the same time. Sensibly, its hinges were on the side facing away from her, and it looked sturdy enough to withstand prolonged bombardment with Keeper lightning. It completely blocked off a short, rectangular passage made from the same reinforced rock used in dwarven railways.

The undecorated section looked suspicious to her, and she inspected it more closely. To her side, she heard the sounds of running footsteps as the first of the civilians broke line of sight with her.

Yes, there was a barely visible slit in the roof at the beginning of the fortified part, as well as a matching groove across the road. A portcullis could drop there to trap intruders inside the passage, which meant – ah, up above. The ceiling was slightly angled to conceal the openings of small pipes.

She shuddered as she imagined what it would be like to be stuck between the door and the portcullis while water slowly flooded the chamber, knowing that there was no way out. Not that she had to worry about drowning in her current body. Actually, the dwarfs would be doing her a favour if they tried this on her, since she should be able to use the water pressure and her ice as leverage to crack the

door open.

With the last of the civilians gone, she moved forwards, pushing against the same kind of anti-evil wards that had covered the city walls. She didn't see them, but her visor pointed out several rapidly-heating spots just below the road.

"What are the enemy troops doing?" she asked, ready to advance.

"Looking constipated while staring at the gate, getting their weapons blessed, and piling up ammo for their siege engines. In other words, nothing useful," Torian replied *"Oh!"* he added cheerfully, *"someone just set his beard on fire by trying to paint a ward in your presence!"*

"Siege engines?"

"Three ballistas and two cannons." He fell quiet for a moment, and then continued in a somewhat more irritated voice *"Your Majesty, Cathy informs me that there are a number of bombs placed near the door that I should also count among the siege weapons."*

"She is correct," Ami confirmed, "knowing about them is useful." Particularly if she wanted to avoid accidental fatalities. *"Thank you. I will proceed now."*

Surrounded by her mist, she strode into the passage with confident steps.

As expected, the portcullis came crashing down when she was about halfway through the chamber. The solid plate of steel rang like a bell as it struck the floor, the deafening sound echoing off the bare walls.

Unperturbed, she stopped and stared up at the door, waiting for the water. Was it preferable to break down the gate or the wall? Excessive collateral damage wouldn't do her any favours when it was finally time for negotiations.

The pipes stayed dry but made a noise as if a tide of loose nails was passing through them. A moment later, circular pieces of gleaming metal showered down on her as if it was raining coins. The metallic hail bounced high when it struck the ground, and the pieces striking

her shield were slowly wearing it down.

"Are they trying to bribe you?" That was Jered's voice, sounding hopeful.

She caught one of the discs, took a closer look at it, and shook her head. The metal showed the same intricate design as each link of the chains the dwarven soldiers wore to protect themselves from spells.

By now, the things covered the ground in a thin layer. The dwarves wanted to make absolutely certain that she couldn't cast any spells near herself. Why?

"Your Majesty, they are shooting at the gate!" Torian suddenly blurted out.

An instant later, she heard a loud bang, and the door shook.

What were they doing? There was no point in confining her, making sure she couldn't teleport, and then breaking open her prison. She scanned the door for damage, but couldn't spot any deformation in the thick metal from her side.

Another impact rattled her cage, and something cracked and broke on the other side. They were targeting the hinges?

The door wobbled, and its top started leaning towards her.

She understood. They weren't opening the gate for her; they were trying to squish her underneath it. Admittedly, flattening her with tons of metal would work, and none of her stashed spells were intended to protect her from a big slab of falling steel. Her gaze darted back to the portcullis. No room to dodge. If necessary, she could abandon this body, possess one of her safety rats, and try again.

No. She needed to appear unstoppable if she wanted to demoralise the dwarven soldiers. The harder they fought her, the more she would be forced to hurt them. In addition, there was the very real danger that she would run out of prepared spells if the fighting went on for too long.

She grabbed her cloak. It wasn't just a way to hide embarrassing alterations to her wardrobe. Here in enemy terrain, she had no owned territory aside from herself. The cloak was a nice, wide piece of fabric for her to build on. She crouched down, draping it over the floor even as it started fluttering.

A draft brushed over her bare upper arms as the door toppled towards her, pushing the air out of its path.

From the building designs stored in her dungeon heart, she selected the giant sword she had her Keeper hand wield during her conquest of the Avatar Islands. As she drew on her gold reserves, the weapon's sharp tip grew from the dark fabric on the ground and shot skywards.

Air pressure from the falling door blew the coins on the ground around like leaves. The huge steel rectangle had already descended far enough to be more ceiling than wall and had almost reached Ami.

The tip of her giant sword clanged against the falling mass of steel and was immediately dulled by the impact.

However, a cloak did not make for a solid foundation. With an ear-piercing screech, the partially finished bottom of the sword skidded over the ground as it was pushed back by the tons of metal it was trying to support.

Ami made a brief strangled noise as she was jerked backwards by the pull on her garment. The world blurred past her as she was dragged by her neck along the floor, ward-coins digging into her fake skin.

The bottom of the sword hit the portcullis, which arrested its backward motion.

Carried by her momentum, she slammed into the flat of the blade and bounced off.

The half-finished sword wasn't done moving yet. Holding up the weight of the door like a poorly-anchored tent pole, it slid sideways

along the portcullis until it finally lodged itself in a corner.

Ears ringing from the noise, fake skin shredded by the coins on the ground, and regenerating one icy arm, Ami sat up in the gap between door and floor.

In hindsight, this hadn't been one of her better ideas. Nevertheless, she had to finish growing her sword and to get moving before the dwarfs came to investigate.

The first sign that something had gone wrong was the horrible metallic screech just after the gate toppled. The next sign was said massive door being slowly raised and pushed out of the doorway it had previously occupied. It crashed to the floor a moment later. Fog and dust poured out of the empty door frame, staying low to the ground like an unrolling carpet.

At that point, none of the watching dwarves were really surprised when a dark silhouette with burning red eyes jumped onto the fallen gate, a ragged cloak fluttering around her. One arm was holding a long, straight staff, the other wasn't visible. Instead, the shadow of a sword as long as door had been tall was floating in the mist, held aloft by a disembodied hand fit for its size.

The Dark Empress permitted her audience a moment to gaze at her in silence before the mist that had poured from the chamber became milky and opaque.

Now the only remaining traces of her presence were her steadily approaching footsteps.

Palace Defenders

Count Zatkel stood with his back to the sealed gates of the palace and compared the disposition of his troops with the plans in his head.

His elite forces, professional soldiers with years of experience each, guarded the final approach to his position. The gently inclined stairway, as wide as the open square at its bottom, tapered towards the top. This was suboptimal, since it meant he could fit fewer defenders on higher ground. He had compensated by placing his top warriors on the lowest steps, where they could swarm any invader.

If the enemy made it that far, she would be stopped at the bottom of the stairs or not at all.

From the square itself, stairs led down in three directions to the garden-like court. Its elevated position made it an ideal spot for his archers, though the round basin of the fountain in the middle took up valuable space. He had already had the decorative spouts deactivated so they couldn't obstruct his men's line of sight.

A sneer flitted over his face as his gaze moved farther, following the two water-filled channels that bordered the gardens and led straight ahead. He grabbed the enchanted amulet positioned exactly under his throat and amplified his voice. "Militia squad eleven, don't treat the water like an impassable obstacle! Our enemy could either freeze it or just jump over it!"

The barely-trained recruits twitched at the sound of his thundering voice. Some turned to face him and saluted, some turned to face their corporal instead, and some just looked at the channel in confusion.

The Count suppressed a grimace. At least these rookies were in a position where they would only encounter combat if they were very, very unlucky. It wasn't impossible, unfortunately. He had run the numbers and analysed the maps, but he couldn't predict with certainty where the enemy would arrive from. One of the many side

entrances was the most likely possibility, much more so than her appearing on one of the multiple tiers of balconies that lined the walls. Her climbing down one of the support pillars, which were wider than a dwarf and sculpted to resemble tree trunks down to the bark, was statistically unlikely, but not impossible.

He shook his head, reluctantly emerging from the comforting stability of numbers and probabilities to bring some more much-needed structure to the real world.

His words, while intended for the worst offenders, had been overheard by the other squads along the water. Small numbers of shield-wielding dwarfs were positioning themselves along the shores as their leaders reduced emphasis on the defence of the many bridges.

"It is always good to see some initiative," he muttered approvingly as he memorised the names of the commanders in question.

"Nevertheless, your plan remains terrible, my Lord," the looming figure at his side commented.

He shot his champion and bodyguard a withering look. If it had any effect, it wasn't visible through the man's face-concealing helmet. "For the last time, Baldran my presence here is necessary!"

Baldran was armoured from head to toe in master-crafted steel plate that left no part of his body exposed. Even with no enemy in sight, his hands hovered near the hilts of his swords. "Which is exactly what makes it a terrible plan. I cannot guarantee your safety in a large-scale battle, my Lord."

"We are not having this discussion again," Count Zatkel said, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "I have taken every precaution I could to make this confrontation as one-sided as possible."

A little more than a thousand men were awaiting the arrival of the enemy, keeping close to the palace. The troops under his direct command formed a rough line along the structure's front face, while his barons had fortified their positions along the left and right channels. Together, all three wings of the army formed a kind of

horseshoe formation that reached down one third of the enormous hall.

At its other end, opposite the palace, loomed the huge stained glass window of the Shrine of Radiant Mercy. A few civilian stragglers were still passing through its pillar-lined entrance, seeking shelter within the holy site.

Fortunately, he didn't have to protect them or the building. He didn't expect Keeper Mercury to approach it, and if he was wrong, well, that would be one less worry for the Kingdom as a whole.

"Count Zatkel!" a female voice shouted in the distance, barely audible over the chatter of the troops. A messenger was crossing one of the bridges about half-way down the court, sprinting at top speed.

One of the men at the guard posts handed her a large tankard with a lid, which she snatched out of his hand in passing. Some of the drink spilled when she took a swig while running, staining the emblem of Baron Rulal pinned to her leather breastplate.

Count Zatkel waved for his men to step aside, and he rushed through the narrow passage that opened in their formation. A messenger meant urgent news.

The moment the sweat-drenched woman arrived within easy speaking distance, she put her half-empty tankard down, wiped her lips with her sleeve, and saluted. "My Lord." She paused to draw in a large gulp of air.

"At ease. Finish drinking, you look like you need it," he decided.

"No time," she blurted out. "Dark Empress could be here any moment now. Almost through Baron Rulal's defence line when I left!"

His head jerked back a fraction, and he held up his palm. "Wait, already? There are almost two hundred men in her way."

"She's hard to engage. Too much fog, and she has a giant floating sword. Fast, too, and freezes important enemies."

He appreciated the succinctness of the report, if not the content. "What about the Baron?" he asked, grimacing.

She shrugged. "Still shouting orders last I saw him. Enemy had gotten pretty close, though."

"What would you say worked best against her?" he asked, deciding to worry about his vassal's fate later.

"Best?" The messenger paused to think for a moment. "Holy magic makes her flinch if you can hit her. Nets work. Only briefly, because, well, giant sword." She shuddered. "The hand is fragile when it's liquid, but it breaks up into a small flood. Dangerous."

"Can it be captured?" he asked. If he could remove the floating limb permanently, then her most useful tool for fighting against multiple opponents would be gone.

The messenger shrugged. "Don't know, my Lord."

"Anything else that could be useful?"

"No – maybe. She can't hit you with her staff from too close. Kicks and punches instead. Still throws people about, but maybe less lethal?"

"Engage with short swords or one-handed axes," he noted out loud. "Good. Dismissed."

The panting woman sat down on the floor right where she had been standing and went back to drinking.

"Captain, recall the skirmishers. They won't slow the enemy down if more than a dozen squads couldn't. Warn the troops that combat is imminent."

"Immediately, my Lord." A stern-faced dwarf wearing a white cape over his armour bowed. He turned and stalked off, barking orders as he disappeared into lines.

A moment later, horns sounded a warning. Count Zatkel returned to his position in front of the palace gates, his bodyguard always a step

behind him. How did Baldran manage to make even his clanging footsteps sound disapproving?

In any case, he had done everything he could to rig the odds in his favour. He still wasn't keen on actually fighting. Battles were messy, chaotic and wasteful. In particular, he hated visiting the families of the fallen. The tears, the guilt, and the awkwardness when none of his memorised lines were appropriate. He tended to upset people when he had to improvise. It was better to avoid all this unpleasantness and resolve the situation without a costly fight.

"You did it, Molnar!" a wide-eyed dwarven soldiers cheered, while others just gaped. "Incredible!"

A dwarf in lighter than usual armour had lunged forward so far his leg, torso, and extended right arm formed a straight line that was almost parallel to the ground. He was wearing a round armoured cap, which did nothing to hide his stunned expression. The surprise on his face was slowly turning into a grin as he stared at his sword, its purple-glowing blade buried to the hilt in the Dark Empress' stomach.

"It really was an impressive stab," Ami agreed in a conversational tone of voice. "One of the fastest I have seen."

Molnar's grin died as she reached down and caught his wrist. He looked up, met her eyes, and his mouth fell open in horror.

She yanked his arm upwards, reeling him in even closer, and slammed her knee into his chin.

Spittle and blood sprayed from his lips as he fell over backwards, landing at the feet of the other soldiers close enough to see her through the fog.

"What the hell?" one of them gasped, taking a step back.

Another stared at the trickle of blood staining the visible part of the blade. "Impossible! With a wound like that-"

She pulled out the sword with a slurping noise. It hurt like a paper cut, but underneath her glamoured skin, her ice golem anatomy was already repairing itself.

The dwarfs started whimpering as she gave the enchanted weapon an experimental twirl. She took a step towards them, and they backed away.

"She- she's not hurt at all!" someone cried out and retreated on wobbly legs.

"Our weapons are useless!" another despairing voice added.

In the fog behind her, a string of clangs and pained cries quickly approached. Her giant sword was returning to her side, moving at chest height. The flat of its blade collided with the soldiers in its path, bowling over everyone who didn't duck fast enough.

The soldiers in front of her broke and ran as soon as its shadow fell over them, escaping through the nearest doorway that was too narrow for it to follow.

Quickly, Ami slammed the door shut behind them and froze it solid in case they recovered their courage. She considered the looted sword she was still holding. It was long and thin, almost like a fencing foil, and clearly magical. Should she keep it? It had pierced through her ice shell with almost no resistance. No, too lethal.

She dropped it near its owner and moved on, taking care not to step on any of the injured dwarfs on the ground.

"The stairway down is behind the fourth door to the left, your Majesty," Torian informed her as she looked down the corridor.

She nodded and dashed forward, throwing the door open only to come face to face with four additional guards.

She braced her feet against the step behind her and swung her staff like a golf club at the shield before her. She liked aiming for shields; they were great targets when one didn't want to cause accidental injuries.

Her blow struck metal with a loud clang and launched the shield's owner backwards, down the staircase. Luckily, he only flew a short distance before slamming into the three dwarves behind him, striking their line like a boulder from a catapult.

The middle soldier took the brunt of the impact and was pushed back, toppling and flailing his arms. In a last-ditch effort to restore his balance, he latched onto the trousers of the man to his right.

His already staggering target yelped as his leg was yanked out from under him. His boots slipped on the smooth stone, its surface wet and slick from the freezing mist flowing down the stairs. He ended up falling on top of the dwarf who had grabbed him.

Together, the three dwarfs rolled down six steps and then hit the wall where the staircase made a right turn.

The only one of the four who remained standing had managed to grab the railing in time. For a moment, he stared at the clattering, cursing and groaning pile of soldiers below before whipping his head back towards Ami. Wide-open brown eyes stared at her through the slits of his helmet. He looked back at the heap of dwarfs, back at her, and then his posture tensed. With his axe raised high, he leapt at her.

His speed wasn't anything noteworthy, and she easily side-stepped the descending weapon. With no dwarfs directly behind him to arrest his fall, she didn't want to throw him down the stairs. Instead, she grabbed his shoulder and spun in a half circle, yanking him along fast enough that his feet left the ground. At the end of her swing, she only had to let go.

He went flying out through the entrance to the staircase, screaming until his landing knocked the breath out of his lungs. He flipped over once and came to a rest on his back, groaning.

Despite her throat being made of ice, she felt a thickness in it as she realised that she had lost count of how many injuries she was directly responsible for today.

"Your Majesty, more troops are converging on your location,"

Torian's mental voice distracted her.

He needn't have bothered, since dwarfs running in armour were very loud. The clanging footsteps of a large group of soldiers echoed through the corridors behind her, approaching rapidly.

She concentrated. The soldier she had just thrown let out a piercing shriek when her giant sword floated past and blotted out his view of the ceiling. It was too big to pass through the narrow stairway, but it could certainly block its entrance. She leaned it against the wall, gently.

Despite her caution, bits of engravings crumbled under the blade's weight. Down here in the underground city, most surfaces were covered in surprisingly intricate artwork. She had probably just wiped out days of painstaking work. With a chagrined expression, she froze the discarded sword in place.

"That will stop them," she replied to her chief warlock, gesturing at the solid metal obstacle.

"I don't doubt it. Also, Duke Libasheshtan has started moving again," Torian said.

"Circling towards the west?" she guessed as she descended the stairs.

The prone dwarfs she had just defeated froze as she looked at them and wisely let her pass.

"Yes, there's a temple you will need to go around if he gets far-"

"I noticed," she interrupted him. The familiar feeling of holy magic from about three floors down made her hackles rise. Duke Libasheshtan had obviously noticed that she could track him and was leading her through an obstacle course. "Is the way forward clear?"

"About twenty soldiers are just entering the stairway from below-"

She retrieved enough water to form a Keeper hand from her storage, but let it go without trying to control it. It splashed onto the

stairs in front of her and flooded downwards with a loud roar.

"-no, they just turned tail and ran out again," Torian corrected himself. *"Ah, you flushed them out. Unfortunately, the stairs lead to a wide-open park with an army waiting for you."*

Her step faltered, but only for a moment. Lips pressed together in determination, she moved on. Duke Libasheshtan was near, and she only needed to get past the army, not to defeat it.

Fog preceded her out of the doorway, shooting into the open like steam from a broken pipe. The banks of mist piled up on each other, granting her cover as she entered the palace courtyard.

Dwarven trumpets sounded in reaction, playing three short notes.

The presence of the temple behind her felt as if she had suddenly stepped into sunlight – sunlight that was slimy, pressed down on her, and caused her stomach to contract. Which was an impressive feat, since her current body lacked said organ.

She fought down the instinctive revulsion and took in her surroundings, only to pause in surprise at the sheer splendour of the place. It was as if she had suddenly stepped into a cathedral large enough to contain flower beds and rivers. The bridges arching over said channels were richly decorated with engraved plant motifs, and even their railings had stone vines winding around them.

Something glittering above drew her gaze upwards. Shiny bands of metal criss-crossed, forming branching patterns that shimmered in silver and coppery hues. They bundled together into thicker branches centred on the support pillars which held up the vaulting ceiling, reinforcing the impression that they were giant mineral trees.

Only reluctantly, she took her eyes off the fascinating sights to focus on the army waiting for her. The troops had formed lines three to five ranks deep, blocking her path to the palace. A wall of shields was facing her, gleaming like colourful beetle shells in the light pouring from the stained glass window behind her.

"Your Majesty, do you see that fop in between the two statues right

on top of the stairs? The one with the beard in a single braid and the rectangular moustache?" Torian's voice asked in her head. *"He's the one who has been giving orders here so far."*

"Thanks." Knowing where the enemy commander was would be as useful as knowing the disposition of his troops. She spotted a few robed dwarfs with staves sprinkled through the formations, most of them close to the largest, most elaborate banners. Wizards or priests, the primary ranged threat. There were also a large number of soldiers with crossbows on a raised platform behind the shield wall, who could potentially chip away her golem body through weight of numbers alone.

Darkness would be a good way to neutralise the threat of both groups. She glanced back at the temple, whose window seemed to be the main light source. It was arched and split into many vertical sections by slender pillars, since it was too large for the glass to support its own weight. Its abstract patterns were pleasant to look at despite the general unease the temple caused her.

The light also seemed to be coming from the temple's interior, which she wasn't willing to mess with. Not only was she not confident about her chances, but there were also frightened civilians inside. Covering the window with mist from the outside should work, however.

Wait, since when had there been a strong breeze blowing her fog away?

Count Zatkel had complete confidence in the accuracy of his calculations, but not as much in the ability of his subordinates to perform their tasks with sufficient precision. He was therefore very relieved when he suddenly felt wind brush over his face, just as he had planned.

Elsewhere in the city, numerous water basins and reservoirs were draining simultaneously, sucking in air to replace the lost volume. By ordering the right doors opened, respectively closed, he had made sure that the pressure difference pulled the required air right from

this chamber.

The resulting breeze was a potent weapon against the Dark Empress' fog, but it would only last until the water reservoirs were empty. For now, it was working as intended and tearing away the blanket of fog she was hiding in.

Banks of mist crawled across the flower beds, retreating from a female figure standing next to a support she could use for cover. The Dark Empress' cloak was fluttering in the wind, and the hellish red glow of her eyes was visible even from his position.

A few of his men blushed or tittered at the sight of her bare legs, exposing themselves as inexperienced young yokels from backwater villages. While her blue and black attire was inappropriate for a noble, a battlefield, or polite society in general, it was downright conservative by Underworld standards.

He supposed he should be grateful that she was wearing something he could look at without feeling embarrassed, especially since she was an empress. The lack of a proper crown was fairly damning, though.

He felt a nudge at his shoulder. "Get on with it," Baldran whispered. "I don't see anything worth staring at like that."

Right, she was incredibly dangerous despite her waifish appearance; something she was currently demonstrating by growing a giant sword from her cloak.

He blinked, took a closer look, and felt the impulsive desire to walk up to her and rap her on the head for making something so shoddy. The thing was poorly balanced, too thick for its length, and even the edges looked dull. Why, if one of his smiths-

Stop, focus. He straightened and activated his voice amplification amulet. "Empress Mercury of the Avatar Islands!" he said, loud enough to reach the farthest corners of the hall. "I am Count Zatkel, ruler of Crystaltunnels!"

She froze, and the red lights in her face flickered for a split-second.

She turned towards him and stared in apparent surprise.

Good, he had her attention and she wasn't advancing farther. "For someone who professes to be here to negotiate, you are certainly behaving very violently."

She actually ducked her head and blurted out something that sounded like a protest, but she was too far away for him to understand the words. Apparently realising this, she straightened and shouted her reply. "You are not giving me any other choice! Nobody was willing to talk to me!"

"You are a Keeper, your Majesty. What could you possibly offer that's worth negotiating about, aside from your complete and unconditional surrender?" He was actually a little curious to learn just how far her insanity went.

The red slits in her shadowed face narrowed. "I- well, you are talking to me right now, so apparently just getting me to leave is worth something to you!" she snapped heatedly. There was a moment of silence, and then she grasped one hand with the other and continued in a much more timid tone "Not that I wanted to escalate things this far. All I want is to stop the fighting. A cease-fire so we can resolve the situation peacefully."

"I don't have the authority to decide something like that," Zatkel replied. Did she really think someone would fall for her blatant attempts to buy herself more time?

"Ah, but you could talk on my behalf to the people who do," the Dark Empress answered quickly, sounding optimistic.

"Well, yes, I could, if I was so inclined."

"Then-"

Unfortunately for her, he wasn't. All he wanted was for her to stay still long enough.

The temple's window shattered outwards. A cloud of coloured glass shards hung in the air like glittering jewels, moving much slower than the magical blast that had disintegrated the work of art. Too

fast for the eye to follow, it struck the enemy Keeper head-on and exploded.

Scrying didn't work inside of temples, and none of the robe-wearing dwarfs prominently displayed out here in Zatkel's army were actually wizards. The real magic users had been working on a combined spell while he stalled the Dark Empress, and his plan had worked beautifully.

There was nothing but a barn-sized crater where she had been standing, but he knew how Keepers worked. There was no way this hadn't merely been a possessed body. The most critical part of the operation was only about to begin.

"Fire! Forward, men! Go!" he shouted, just to make sure. They had already been told what to do the moment they heard the detonation, and were rushing towards it.

His crossbowmen, just as disciplined, were firing heavy bolts with very special, cyan-blue tips. Like the fragments of the oversized sword, they started raining down around the black wisp of red-eyed shadow who was rising from the crater.

To the best of Zatkel's knowledge, a Keeper ejected from her host could only do one of three things. Possess another minion, reappear in her true body, or travel to safety.

Now, the ward-tipped bolts currently raining down on Keeper Mercury's location should keep her boxed in, unable to reach either safety or another minion to possess. He was betting that she couldn't exert enough force as an immaterial shadow to push the wards aside, and even if she could - well, there were a thousand soldiers rushing at her who could hold them in place. They would also be useful if she decided to materialise as her true, vulnerable self.

The cloud of darkness looked angry as it shot forward, only to bounce off an invisible surface. It paused for an instant, glaring at the wards in apparent confusion.

When you had the resources of an entire city to draw upon and were

facing a Keeper so evil that normal wards disintegrated in her mere presence, then the solution was adamantine.

The darkness fled straight upwards, only to find out that there were wards in the tunnels above the chamber too. Her attempt to sink into the ground yielded the same result.

He would have been lying if he said he didn't enjoy the sight of a Keeper darting around uselessly like a frantic fly. The costs of his plan had been huge, but he doubted that Duke Libasheshtan would care about the expenses once his men had pushed that pesky invader straight into the temple behind her.

Last edited: Oct 29, 2016

Ward Trouble

Ami felt a flash of pain so brief she almost missed it, and the world around her filled with noise, light and motion. Startled, she needed a moment to realise that her host body was gone.

Zatkel had been talking to her to set her up for a sneak attack, she noted numbly. If her immaterial form had teeth, she would have been gritting them. She had been so happy there had been a dwarven noble willing to listen to her. It had felt as if she was finally making progress.

Bitterly disappointed, she drifted upwards through the falling debris to continue her attack. Mentally reaching out towards the rat she had left in the previous room, she launched herself forward to possess it.

Her cloud-like body came to a sudden and unexpected stop as she encountered an invisible obstacle in the air. The confining pressure was unexpected, but not entirely unfamiliar. She had encountered similar resistance before, when she had broken through wards. However, none of those had been strong enough to stop her.

Sliding experimentally to the left and right to test the boundaries of the barriers, she quickly found out that they surrounded her. Even rapidly ascending towards the ceiling and diving into the ground didn't let her slip through the walls of force boxing her in.

It was possible for her to get trapped in her shadow form? Realising that she might be in a lot of trouble, she threw herself against the barriers to break them down. When they failed to shatter, she worriedly scanned her surroundings for their source. Were the wards more effective against her because she didn't have a body, or was there something special about them?

Spotting them wasn't hard, even with the dust and fog blown about by the breeze. In the rubble-strewn area around her, small pyres of crackling black energy sizzled and burned as they eroded the underground. Nearby plants were drying up and catching fire, and the constant discharges of dark energy turned the ground

underneath the arcane symbols into fine, scorched powder.

Occasional glimpses of adamantine's light blue shade made it through the corona of dark energies, revealing that the delicate metal constructs remained completely unharmed.

Even though Ami knew of no way to destroy them, she normally wouldn't have been worried about wards small enough to be attached to crossbow bolts. While they wouldn't crumble from her mere presence, they were light enough to shove them aside. Or at least, they would have been if she currently had a body. With a sinking feeling, she realised that she would have to find some other solution before the dwarfs could take advantage of the situation.

They were currently sprinting towards her location, with groups of three soldiers separating from the bulk of their forces. For each trio, one dwarf was wielding a shovel, one was holding a bucket, and the third carried metal tongs as long and thick as Ami's arms. The buckets contained sand, which the soldiers dumped onto the shovels as each group approached one of the blazing wards.

Holding the tongs as far away from their bodies as they could, they reached for the adamantine symbols. Arcs of lightning-shaped darkness flashed between the wards and the tools that gripped them. The soldiers flinched, keeping their distance as they dropped the tiny objects onto the sand-covered shovels.

Holding the tools like that had to be tiring and uncomfortable, but Ami understood why they were doing it. The tongs were blistering and steaming where they had touched the dark energies, and patches of rust were flaking off like snow.

The dwarfs advanced, and so did the barrier anchored to the wards. For each step the formation of soldiers took forward, she was forced back an equal distance. They were pushing her towards the nauseating presence of the temple behind her.

Involuntarily, she turned to look at the building. The huge hole gaping in its window seemed like a maw ready to devour her, with the stumps of its support pillars being the teeth. She didn't doubt that the Light gods could affect her if she entered a consecrated

area. They had told her that they would imprison her the next time she entered one of their temples, and then it would be all over. She would never return home, never see her friends and family again, and wouldn't be able to protect he world from the Dark Kingdom.

She couldn't let herself be trapped! At the very least, she needed the dwarfs to stop pushing her. She accessed her Keeper storage to grab a freezing spell, but it didn't work quite as well as she had hoped. The spells were there, but stuck somehow. She didn't manage to get a solid enough grip on them to shift them back into normal space.

What was happening? It almost felt as if her spells were out of reach. Experimentally, she tried flinging one of them at a random tile of her dungeon instead, and was rewarded with a small pillar of ice.

This was definitely a range problem. Apparently, she didn't count as a dungeon heart while she didn't have a physical body. What could she do?

She needed a body. Looking down at the crater below her, she briefly mourned the two safety rats she had been carrying on her person for an emergency like this. They hadn't survived the explosion any better than her ice golem or her giant sword.

Using Keeper transport was out. Even if it had been working correctly, she wouldn't have had any friendly or neutral territory within the barrier to deposit an imp on. She would have to create a new body with a spell.

Which was a sound idea in theory, but the barrier wards weren't her only problem. The dwarven soldiers surrounding her had brought their usual warding chains, which prevented spell effects from manifesting within their protected area.

Those, she could destroy simply by casting enough powerful spells in quick succession. It would take some long and tedious effort, but –

"Mercury, do you need help?" Cathy's worried voice appeared in her thoughts. The swordswoman was pacing through the rows of crystal

balls, glancing at those that showed the battlefield. *"This isn't anything we planned for!"*

Ami could definitely use some assistance. It was fortunate that the communication magic targeted at her also affected her dungeon heart, otherwise the spell-cancelling wards around her would not let her receive messages. Cathy was definitely within range of the dungeon heart, so there was nothing stopping Ami from sending her reply.

Nothing aside from the fact that her communication spell was derived from the giant eyeballs in the scavenging room, and that her current shadow form didn't come with eyeballs. This disembodied state was quickly becoming frustrating.

"All right, I'll take your silence as confirmation. I'll send some youma to bail you out," Cathy said after waiting for a few seconds.

She couldn't! They'd die if they tried to teleport into an area covered by the spell-suppressing wards!

The swordswoman turned towards the youma's corner of the room. "Mareki, Umbra, you- eep!" Eyes wide, she took a stumbling step backwards as two squealing imps pounced on her, shaking their heads frantically.

"It looks as if her Majesty does not want your meddling," Torian said, smirking at the blonde.

"Really? I'd have never figured that out without you," Cathy answered with a flat expression. Frowning, she addressed the imps clinging to her arms. "And you, let go already! I got the message!"

Satisfied, Ami focused back on her own situation. Her momentary relief vanished when she noticed how much closer the temple was. She needed a quick solution. Right, she wanted to destroy the anti-casting wards, which meant she needed a barrage of spells. The dungeon heart was out of range, so she couldn't use it to form the spells, but she had never needed it for using her Sailor Mercury magic in the first place.

Concentrating on her Shabon Spray, she hesitated in sudden confusion. How was she supposed to go through the instinctive motions without her hands and arms? It certainly felt as if she should be able to cast the spell even without them, but she didn't know how. She glanced at the ever-shortening distance to the temple. It didn't look as if she would have enough time to figure it out.

Could she push against the wards somehow? The dwarfs carrying the wards had to hold them down with their tongs, so there was definitely some resistance. Throwing herself against the barriers as hard as she could didn't seem to change anything, though.

She remembered when she had visited a Light temple on her own. A force emanating from the building had tried to stop her from approaching. This seemed to be the same effect. At that time, she had been able to push her way through the resistance on muscle power alone, so it probably wasn't strong enough to save her now. Admittedly, she had been in her senshi form at the time, but there were a lot of dwarfs working together.

The temple was looming over her, growing inexorably closer.

She needed to get out, quickly. Could she risk rematerializing? She would be reappearing in her true body surrounded by enemies, and the wizards in the temple would by now be ready to blow up her location again. They were looking very attentive.

She estimated her odds of being able to block their spell as about fifty-fifty. Those were terrible odds when her life was at risk, especially with the dark gods waiting for her. Knowing that the Light would treat her decently if she got captured made her even more reluctant to consider this option. Perhaps she would try it if she had exhausted every other option, or perhaps not even then.

How smart were the anti-spellcasting wards? If they couldn't distinguish between unshaped mana pulses and completed workings, then she might be able to trick them. Would they expend themselves trying to prevent her from channelling magic in short, undirected bursts?

She gathered some power and expelled it in an eruption of blue,

green and black sparkles. They expanded outwards in a flashy-looking wave until they hit the barriers, which stopped only the dark-looking motes.

The spell-suppressing wards didn't react, but the closest dwarfs yelled in alarm and threw themselves to the ground to dodge the colourful lights.

Bright flashes briefly drowned out all colour as destructive energies discharged themselves into the wards on the shovels. Some of the sand started melted into glass from the heat.

The adamantine symbols were light enough to swim on the molten liquid's surface, and one of the dwarfs muttered a curse as his ward spilled right off his shovel.

Ami felt a sudden surge of hope. Her opponents couldn't push her into the temple if the wards became too dangerous to move.

The dwarfs were already trying to manoeuvre the fallen object back onto the shovel, using tongs and large amounts of sand.

Having no time to lose, she tried a much stronger pulse than before.

In response, the destructive energies lashing out the adamantine flared up brighter. One discharge struck molten glass, creating a spray of flying droplets, and one of the nearby soldiers started howling in pain.

There were a few clinking noises as the wards burnt their way straight through the shovels and dropped to the ground.

The small disc of adamantine closest to Ami hopped off its perch. Like a coin that had landed on its edge, it rolled past its handlers. An unfortunately-timed discharge catapulted it over the tongs thrown into its path. Surrounded by crackling black lightning, it left a scorched trail in its wake as it accelerated into the line of soldier waiting in the back.

Satisfied to feel the advance of the barriers falter, Ami decided to get rid of the wards by making them melt their way through the ground. Hopefully, the dwarfs would not get themselves burnt badly trying to

stop her.

A ball of soft white light hit her from behind, slamming her against the barrier and breaking her concentration. The attack felt horrible, even if it didn't seem to do her any real harm. She turned and saw a group of priests in white and golden robes stand near the temple entrance. The long-bearded dwarfs had their arms raised and were forming more of the white orbs between their hands.

Quickly, she slid aside when one of them hurled the spell at her. She may not have had much room to dodge within the barriers, but her immaterial form was very fast. Having to evade attacks was an unwanted distraction, but a lesser one than getting hit again. She consoled herself with the thought that the dwarfs really wanted her to stop what she was doing.

Ducking under another orb that made her shiver, she heard Count Zatkel shouting orders. Something about salamanders?

There was movement behind the somewhat disorderly front line as soldiers opened gaps in the shield wall. Wheelbarrows with something that looked like primitive bulldozer blades attached to their front rolled towards her.

She didn't need much imagination to figure out what they were meant for. There was some sort of red-scaled leather covering the thick metal parts. It looked similar enough to a horned reaper's skin that she was willing to bet that it protected against heat, too.

Her fears came true when the strange vehicles neared the dropped wards, pushed by heavily-armoured soldiers covered completely in several layers of drenched blankets. Droplets of molten glass hissed as they landed on the wet fabric, but the dwarfs pressed onwards. With large ladles improvised from polearm hafts and helmets, they scooped the adamantine symbols out of their glowing puddles and onto their wheelbarrows. Assistants rushed in from the sides and pinned the wards in place with iron slabs so heavy it took four dwarfs to carry them.

Once again, she felt herself being shoved closer to the temple as the vehicles started moving. She was distressingly close to it

already, only about twenty more meters away, and some of the dwarfs started cheering.

Unnerved, she weaved out of the path of another attack. As far as she could tell, the heat wasn't doing anything to the wheelbarrows, but their metal covers were starting to glow a dull red, corroding wherever an arc of darkness touched them. Damage was being inflicted, but not fast enough to prevent her from being forced onto sacred ground.

She needed to intensify the power of the destructive effects and decided to use the most straightforward solution: more evil energy. The strength of the violent flares seemed to be proportional to the amount of black magic stopped by the barriers. Drawing on her dungeon heart, she channelled a greater proportion of evil magic, as if she was trying to cast one of her corrupted spells. This time, she didn't expend it as a pulse, but kept the power flowing out in a constant stream.

A colourless glare seeped out from underneath the metal covers, and the wards slammed against the backs of the wheelbarrows with audible clangs. Their drivers swayed, caught off-guard by the sudden impact, and had to lean heavily against their vehicles to get them moving again.

The wheelbarrows still weren't melting, but the sudden increase in repulsing force from the temple was even better, in Ami's opinion. Stronger evil magic obviously caused stronger rejection from the temple.

Hesitating only for a split second, she accessed the power she had been gifted by Queen Metallia. She didn't like using it, since doing so felt as if she was betraying a part of herself, but she couldn't afford to be squeamish in this situation. She needed evil energy, and what purer source could there be than a dark god?

The dark power flooded through her, leaking out into the surrounding air and attacking the wards.

Flame-like tongues of black energy licked upwards from the wheelbarrows, and the vehicles started quaking and creaking as the

dwarfs pushed against them fruitlessly.

It was working! Ami smiled in relief as she felt the vehicles budge and retreat centimetre by centimetre.

A collective groan came from the soldiers surrounding her. One of the closest dwarfs tilted his head backwards to look up at her. His eyes widened behind his helmet, and his tongs slipped from his fingers. "L-light, she's laughing!" he stammered.

Wait, she had a face they could see while she was like this? She paid more attention to the way her form was stretching and bloating from all the dark power she was drawing in. She had apparently grown, as she found the priests' holy spells much harder to dodge.

One of the glowing spheres struck her, and she barely felt it. Still, she twitched from the impact and then almost lost her concentration when she noticed she had hands she could twitch with.

"She's assuming her true form!" someone yelled, voice shrill and high-pitched.

"It's a demon! Kill it! Kill it now!" one of the female soldiers yelled as she raised her crossbow with shaking hands.

"Soldiers, raise shields and brace for impact. Wizards, prepare to fire on my command," Count Zatkel ordered. He waited for three seconds and made a chopping motion with his hand. "Fire!"

Ami knew what was coming, but just like the first time, she didn't see the wizards' combined spell move before it hit her. Briefly, she felt her form tear apart, reducing her to a cloud of shapeless shadow.

Dust and debris shot upwards through her immaterial body, concealing her surroundings.

Disoriented but unharmed, she continued channelling Metallia's power and waited for the airborne debris to drop back into the new crater below her.

As the air currents carried away the floating dust, she found herself facing concentric semi-circles of battered shields. The dwarfs hiding

behind the upright rectangles were in the process of standing up again, except for a very few who had been flung onto their backs by the blast.

She was glad to see that none of them were dead. From the sad state of the ruined flowerbed below her, she concluded that the wizards had used a smaller explosion than before in order to avoid friendly casualties. More importantly, the vehicles with the adamantine wards had gained some momentum moving away from her.

The dark power surrounding her was now so thick that it darkened the surrounding air. Like smoke trapped behind glass, it pressed against the barriers and made their boundaries visible.

She could see exactly which parts of the obstacle, formed by the individual spherical field originating from each ward, were giving ground fastest. Directing most of her output towards the weak parts, she managed to make one of the wheelbarrow pushers stagger.

His vehicle jerked backwards, almost running him over before three alert soldiers managed to grab and stop it.

"Men, don't be discouraged now!" Count Zatkel roared. "We are going to win this! The enemy remains contained and victory is close! Everyone, help with pushing the wheelbarrows! We will not fail now! For Nimbadnur, charge!"

With only a few nervous glances up at her, the soldiers rushed towards the stuck vehicles. When there was no more room on the handles for more hands, they put them on the backs of the men in front of them instead. Together, they started pushing, synchronising their efforts with a chant of "One. Two. One. Two."

Their cooperation was bearing fruit as the vehicles started moving towards Ami again. The boundary walls of the barriers crackled with dark energy as both forces collided and the space between her and her enemies compressed. Step by painful step, they reverted the gains she had just made.

Desperate, she tried to draw in more power. Returning to her real

body was not a viable option as the wizards had just demonstrated. Motes of blackness coalesced in the air as she was pushed even closer to the temple. The building's presence felt more than a little nauseating now and was sapping her of strength she needed to keep pushing back.

Something bat-like passed her above and shot straight towards the marble walls behind her. It caught fire and burnt to dust before it could splatter on the hard stone.

What was that? She started paying closer attention to the knots of darkness that drifted in the air like snowflakes. One of them collided with a tumbling leaf and sank into it. Even as she watched, the piece of dry plant matter started changing, growing thicker and sprouting tendrils.

Before it could finish transforming, it was catapulted towards the temple and ended its brief existence as a fiery streak.

Suddenly excited, she realised that this was the same phenomenon as the animated dust bunnies back when she had first experimented with Metallia's power. The tiny beings were obviously affected by the anti-evil wards, but didn't contain enough dark power to resist being pushed towards the temple. If one of them survived long enough…

She searched the area below her, spotting a few indistinct forms being flung towards the holy building before her gaze settled on a delightful sight. A thorny plant was stubbornly anchoring itself to the ground with its wriggling roots while its tulip-shaped flower whipped around, its petals gnashing their teeth.

As soon as she identified the body she could possess, she shot towards it. The mindless creature didn't put up any resistance as she sunk into its form, instinctively recognising her as its superior.

The dwarfs cried out in shock as she disappeared from their sight.

Her first priority was protecting her newly-gained and fragile body from the wizards. With access to her storage restored, she drew water from her storage, spraying it towards the temple's window. Hurriedly, she froze the liquid and shielded herself. Now she -

The ice disappeared in a searing flash, and the shockwave from the explosion washed over her shield and made it glow a bright purple.

"Get her! GET HER NOW!" Count Zatkel screamed at his startled soldiers while the thunder still echoed through the hall.

The dwarfs stopped looking at the explosion and focused on her glowing shield. Raising their weapons, they charged through the barriers, shouting battle cries at the top of their lungs.

From the perspective of a defenceless plant, the incoming warriors looked like giants. Ami used up another Shabon Spray Freezing spell and surrounded herself with a barrier of ice, buying herself a few seconds. She needed to move, which meant possessing a new golem body. Dropping one next to her was impossible, since she was on enemy territory, but she could still create one from scratch.

Well, she would be able to do so if she was able to cast spells. Her new body had no limbs, but she could use her dungeon heart to form the spell now that she counted as being in range again. This left the issue of being surrounded by soldiers wearing chains made from spell-suppressing wards.

Quickly, she tried to create a golem among the group of dwarven wizards, who obviously weren't protected by said wards. Otherwise, they wouldn't have been able to create an explosive projectile to hurl at her. Sadly, they were protected by being inside a temple instead. To her remote spell-casting ability, it felt as if the space they were in didn't even exist.

Cracks were spreading through the ice surrounding her as her enemies hacked into it with axes and swords.

"Mercury, they are bringing picks!" Cathy warned.

One of the enchanted digging tools flew through the air in an arc, bypassing five lines of soldiers before someone in the sixth caught it and passed it on. A horribly unsafe but fast method of getting the picks to her location.

She grabbed hold of one instance of corrupted black fog in her

storage, but hesitated before releasing it. This was going to hurt a lot of people, something she didn't really want to do. Unfortunately, it was her best shot at driving off the dwarfs striking at her, which would also get rid of the warding chains they were wearing. At least they were right next to a temple where they could get healing, she consoled herself as she unleashed the spell.

The black clouds billowed outwards from her location, enveloping the dwarfs striking at the ice around her. Instantly, they howled in pain and dropped their weapons to grasp at their eyes, ears and noses. Blood stained their gauntlets as they backed off, stumbling into each other. Some were quick-witted enough to shut their eyes, only opening them for brief glances at their surroundings. Those who were still able to grabbed their less fortunate comrades by the arms and guided them in the direction of the barriers.

In this particular case, the impenetrable adamantine wards were working in Ami's favour. They trapped the evil spell just like they trapped her, holding it back from the bulk of the dwarven force and preventing the wind from dispersing her mist.

Using their distraction, she created a Keeper hand and started sweeping away any wards that were lying on the ground.

A large chunk of her ice shelter disappeared in a fiery explosion. One of the wizards on the balcony behind the broken windows was sitting upright, his staff pointed in her direction. The others were still in various stages of picking themselves off the floor, clearly having been too close when their spell blew up prematurely upon encountering her ice.

She quickly hurled a few stored freezing spells in their direction – being unable to target them directly didn't mean she couldn't aim at them the normal way, even if the angle was poor. Hopefully, that would stop them from collaborating on another combined spell. Her Keeper hand took a break from swiping at the anti-magic wards and flew in their direction, only to disintegrate into a spray of water as it crossed the temple boundaries.

A stabbing headache discouraged her from trying that again. She took a little comfort in the fact that the water continued on its

trajectory, smashing into the magic users and toppling them. Mission half accomplished.

"Leave your spell-eaters behind!" Count Zatkel shouted from his command post near the palace. "Or better yet, toss them back in!"

The soldiers fleeing from the black fog complied with his orders as best as they could. Even though some of the dwarfs were so disoriented by the fog that they threw the chains the wrong way, enough of them landed near Ami that her situation hadn't notably improved.

By now, she was feeling very tired of hearing the Count's voice.

Her growing frustration aside, she needed to focus on burning through all those chain links before her current body got destroyed. It looked as if the dwarfs were aiming a cannon, and she didn't think their wizards were out of action for good either.

Casting that many powerful spells in the time she had left seemed impossible. Unless…

"Out! Everyone, out of the room now!" she addressed her support crew.

Her warlocks were already half-way to the exit after her first few words. Research magicians who hesitated and asked questions when someone told them to run tended to have short careers.

Cathy was actually the last to reach the door. *"Mercury? What's happening?"* she asked, looking over her shoulder at the desks melting into an evaporating azure sludge.

"Renovations!" Ami replied as she finished selling off unneeded equipment, which was everything but the mana conduits for her power-hungry crystal balls. With a little tweak to the scavenger room blueprint, she could connect those cables right to the giant eyestalks without things going awry. Probably. For a few minutes, at least.

Pumpkin-sized eyeballs erupted from the floor, riding upwards on red stalks of sinew and muscle. Each one stood where a crystal ball had been, undulating slowly.

"Go back in!" she told the warlocks. *"I need everyone to send messages to my current body. Not to me, to the plant,"* she clarified. *"It doesn't matter what you say, only that you keep sending messages."*

A communication spell targeting her would just take the shortcut through her dungeon heart. Specifically contacting her host instead would aim it at her current location - where the dwarven wards would try to absorb it before it could take effect. The amount of power contained in a message normally wouldn't even cause one of those chain links grow warm, which was why she was plugging the power supply for her crystal balls into the eyestalks she intended to use as signal boosters.

"It shall be done, your Majesty," Torian said, returning to the room at the head of the group. His confident expression slipped as one of the nearby eyeballs vented sparkling steam. Another was whipping around randomly, while a third was growing oozing bubbles on its stalk. "You heard the Empress! Hurry up!" he shouted as he stepped aside, waving his subordinates past.

Ami felt a sharp dip in her mana reserves, enough to make her dungeon heart supplement her magic from her treasury. One spell strong enough to burn out a warding link was barely noticeable. Over forty at once certainly made her feel the drain. She took it as confirmation that her idea was working.

A constant rumble of rapid-fire snapping noises reached her as link after link of warding chain snapped. Several dwarfs lingering just outside of her caustic fog stared down at their belts and called out warnings to their comrades.

One of them saw that his chain was down to the last four links and straightened up. He snatched one of the picks from the ground, sucked in a deep breath, squeezed his eyes tightly shut and charged straight into the banks of black mist.

She couldn't see his face underneath his helmet, but she could see enough blood to know that he was suffering horribly for his bravery. Once again, she wished the dwarfs were more reasonable so she wouldn't need to hurt people just to survive. She prodded him gently

with her Keeper hand, and his desperate, blind charge missed her ice block completely.

Hopefully, others wouldn't follow his example. The idea of good people sacrificing their health or lives to stop her was incredibly disturbing.

Suddenly, a cacophony of voices all talking at once flooded her mind as the communication spells got through.

Immediately, she seized the opportunity to conjure a new body for herself. Gold turned into magical power, and a pillar of ice appeared next to her. It quickly flowed into the shape of a slender human female.

A black tendril lashed out from the animated plant and briefly connected it to the ice golem, whose eyes filled with crimson light. Ami's perspective changed to one she was more used to, and she immediately used her new-found mobility to jump high into the air. Safe from attacks aimed at her previous location, she shielded herself, reapplied her glamour, and triggered her senshi transformation.

Blue light briefly enveloped her form even as her frozen outer layer turned into hair and skin and her Sailor Mercury uniform replaced her ice chain mail. Another quick conjuration at the apex of the leap recovered her cloak, and she felt finally prepared to break free of her confinement.

She landed in a crouch, her cloak draping itself over the ground behind her and providing her with territory from which she could grow a replacement for her giant sword. Now that the closest spell-devouring wards were gone, she could use her entire magical arsenal directly against nearby opponents.

The combined mental voices of the warlocks were no longer reaching her in her new body, as they kept addressing the plant.

"Good work, everyone," she congratulated the magicians. She frowned in the direction of the enemy leader, but her lips twisted upwards in a vicious smile. *"Please continue by sending your*

messages to Count Zatkel instead."

Count Zatkel watched his men through a telescope, wishing they were faster about clearing the ice off the wheelbarrows. He couldn't fault them for being reluctant to get close to the stuck vehicles, as the constant discharges of vile energies against the wards were sending spikes and shards in every direction. Still, he was proud to see his soldiers think on their feet and attach longer handles to picks while approaching behind a multi-layered wall of shields.

His gaze moved onto the billowing black cloud contained between the wards and the temple, and his expression darkened. He was less satisfied with the performance of the wizards. The Keeper's new body was conveniently confined into a limited space right in front of them, so they should have blown her to pieces already!

A sudden patter made him put down his telescope in surprise. It sounded like hail striking armour, but he wasn't feeling anything.

"My Lord, the spell-eaters!" Baldran's urgent voice said to his side.

Reflexively, he looked down at the chain of intricately-crafted wards he had wrapped around his waist. His eyes widened in surprise when he saw that it was only half the length it should be.

In the short moment he remained frozen, three more of the links snapped in rapid sequence.

This was impossible! Nobody could- at least not from over there-

Speechless, he raised his gaze back towards the column of black fog in front of the temple.

A wheelbarrow was flying through the air, spinning and trailing smoke as it travelled on a ballistic trajectory towards one of the room's balconies.

No! The wards! His men had to move to patch up the weak point and-

His hand was half-way up to his voice-amplification necklace when he spotted a small flash that sent another wheelbarrow airborne.

A large bulge deformed the barriers, ballooning outwards. The black fog behind it suddenly surged forward as if a dam had been broken, banks of agonising mist creeping towards his soldiers.

His arms dropped back to his sides, his hands limp. The wards had been breached. This wasn't what he had planned! According to his calculations, the chance of failure was so small that only gross incompetence-

He felt a touch at his shoulder and swallowed around the painful lump in his throat. His bodyguard demanded his attention.

"…Lord, you need to evacuate! Now! Everyone's spell-eaters are disappearing!" Baldran said, tugging insistently at Zatkel's shoulder.

"We can still- no, you are right." He turned towards the stairs just as another ballistic wheelbarrow smashed itself to pieces against the room's wall. "My personal guard, to me. We shall retreat to the Duke's chapel!"

The soldiers wearing the most elaborate plate harnesses saluted and stepped out of their formation to move towards him.

Yes. He would retreat for now. Perhaps he should direct some parting insults at his opponent so that she chased him instead of the Duke? Fighting her way through his army would slow her down enough to give him a considerable head start, so-

Suddenly, he could no longer hear his own thoughts. Voices filled his head, all loud and talking over each other so they merged into an incomprehensible, mind-numbing drone.

He staggered and covered his ears as he frantically looked around, searching for the source of the attack.

His men had stopped too and were grasping at their helmets. Braided beards writhed like snakes and elongated rapidly, while patches of unkempt hair peeked out of visors.

Baldran's helmet popped off his head, and an untamed curtain of black hair spilled out. Grunting, the tall dwarf brushed it aside with his left while pulling his sword with his right.

Before the bodyguard could hack off the offending growth, he staggered backwards, his head pulled down when one of the soldiers behind him stepped on his hair. He had enough presence of mind to let go of his naked blade before he waved his arms to recover his balance, but the damage was done. Like a falling tree, he toppled onto the men behind him.

Mounds of hair cushioned the fall and also muffled its sound, not that Count Zatkel was able to hear this. Wide-eyed, he watched as his elite soldiers entangled themselves worse and worse in the ever-lengthening strands. The only comparable thing he had ever seen was a runaway sheep that hadn't been shorn for seasons.

His soldiers were also growing at an alarming rate, and their struggles were making things worse. "Stop moving!" he ordered, but what escaped his throat was an odd clucking noise.

Eyes bulging, he turned towards a polished shield that had miraculously stayed clear of the encroaching hedge of hair.

A tiny yellow chicken stared back at him from the improvised mirror.

Reeling in shock, he stumbled backwards, only for a flash of green behind him to demand his attention.

He spun and found a blue-clad imp grinning down at him, showing crooked, uneven teeth. Fist-sized eyes sparkled with mischief as they met his own.

Baldran bucked and shouted, but like the rest of the nearby soldiers, he couldn't manage to tear himself free to drive the abominable creature off.

The imp poked her tongue out at the bodyguard and made a rude gesture before she returned her attention to Count Zatkel. Her grin grew toothier as she raised a large, empty brown bag.

Being a chicken offered him a larger field of view than normal, and

as the dark opening descending on him, he caught a final glimpse of the Dark Empress. She was standing on her giant sword, leaning into the wind as the ridiculous weapon flew over his army and towards the palace.

Exquisite statues, elaborate wooden panelling and silken banners flashed past Duke Libasheshtan as his donkey accelerated. Some of his best soldiers were right behind him, the sound of their mounts' hooves muffled by the thick carpet.

"Mengolin, what's the status of the Dark Empress?" he asked, turning to his court wizard.

The bearded magician was swaying in his saddle and looked sick. If it wasn't for the apprentice seated behind him and holding him, he would have fallen off his mount already. "Angry and taking the shortest possible path toward us, your Grace," he said in a thin voice as he stared into his crystal ball.

The Duke nodded. If he had to take a shortcut through his palace and let donkeys make a mess of it in order to prevent her from chasing him through heavily populated areas, then that was a sacrifice he was willing to make. Carpets could be replaced, lives couldn't. Nevertheless, he wasn't satisfied. Running from a Keeper within his own city was vexing in a way he found hard to fully grasp. There was worry for his citizens, outrage at the fiend's presence, and growing exasperation that her daring attack seemed to be working so far.

The riders arrived at the marble staircase leading to the lower courts. Now, donkeys were not exactly noble steeds, but they had their advantages. They could certainly carry a dwarf in armour, and more importantly, were experts at traversing difficult terrain. Thus, the riders could continue unimpeded.

Mengolin yelped, and there was a rustle of fabric and a frantic cry of "Master!"

Libasheshtan turned around and saw his court wizard draped over

the neck of his mount. The apprentice had a claw-like grip on the back of Mengolin's robe, preventing him from sliding head-first to the ground.

"Sorry, sorry," the court wizard apologised. "I have just learned that she found a counter for our spell-eater wards. This means she can target us if she figures out exactly where we are!"

"We shall keep moving, then," Duke Libasheshtan said. He turned to the figure riding at his side.

Countess Zasod was balancing an active crystal ball on the palm of one hand, keeping her other on the reins of her mount.

"My King," the Duke addressed the crowned figure shown in the glowing orb. "You heard Mengolin's report; the situation is dire. Loath as I am to beg for help, I have no choice but to ask you to send the Avatar to our aid."

The King looked as if he had just bitten into a sour apple. "I would grant your request in a heartbeat if I could. Unfortunately, Lord Amadeus has left the Capital to chase down the minions of Keeper Mukrezar."

The Duke's mouth slackened, and he stared at his liege lord in disbelief. The Avatar couldn't just abandon them in their hour of need! "He left? When the Kingdom is under attack by Keeper Mercury?" he asked in a low voice, slowly shaking his head.

"Yes, that concern was brought to his attention while he was on his way to the hero gate." The King's bushy, white eyebrows narrowed into a frown. "It pains me to say it, but I fear his judgement is impaired when it comes to the new empress of the Avatar Islands."

"Impaired?" Duke Libasheshtan repeated. A man who communed directly with the Light would surely be safe from ailments of the mind. Then what could affect – wasn't the Dark Empress rumoured to be attractive? No. No, he was not going to impute such weakness to the Avatar, not even in the privacy of his own mind.

"I believe his exact words were," the King began, imitating the

Avatar's impatient and disdainful tone nearly perfectly, "'just stop provoking the bookworm and she won't bother you.'"

Duke Libasheshtan remained silent as he parsed the absurdity of the statement.

The King sighed. "He proved unwilling to further discuss the issue after my dear wife very diplomatically pointed out that 'it was exactly because of this kind of thinking that he didn't have an empire anymore'," he said, his voice sounding like the Queen's as he quoted her.

Duke Libasheshtan winced. While he agreed with the sentiment, he would have never voiced it aloud in the Avatar's presence. His shoulders slumped. "He will not be aiding me, then."

"I shall, of course, grant you as much support as the hero gates can handle," the King offered. "Elite soldiers, mages, magical items – tell me what you need, and you shall have it."

The Duke shook his head. "Thank you, my Liege, but I am not lacking any of those. All they do is slow the enemy down."

"Then what will you do? Enter the hero gates to escape from her?"

"I am not leaving my city!" the Duke replied, louder than appropriate. He would not repay his people's loyalty by fleeing like a coward. Even if they forgave him, he wouldn't be able to live with the shame of having left his people at the mercy of a Keeper. "Do you think she will be satisfied with having driven me off? She would switch targets or take out her anger on the citizens! I will stay and oppose her to my last breath!"

"In that case, there may be a way to outright slay the monster," the King said after a moment. "However, it will almost certainly cost you your life."

Duke Libasheshtan perked up. He had risked his life in battle before, often for less worthy causes than killing a Keeper. If the price for taking down Keeper Mercury was his life, then it was his duty to pay it. "If I can end this war without a costly invasion of her dungeon,

then I am eager to do so," he said.

"Very well. Baron Leopold did not kill the foul Keeper Bartholomeus."

What did the instigator of the great civil war have to do with- wait!

The Duke's gauntlets closed into fists with an audible clang as he straightened his back, feeling a vein pulse on his forehead. "Bartholomeus lives?" he shouted, spittle flying from his lips.

"No, that despicable monster is dead. Calm yourself," the King ordered, waving his wrinkly hand in a shushing motion. "Baron Leopold was made to take all the credit so the true circumstances of the Keeper's death would remain a secret." A predatory gleam appeared in the ancient monarch's eyes. "These circumstances can be reproduced."

Duke Libasheshtan decided to ignore the more surprising parts of these revelations in favour of that which was truly important. "What do I have to do?"

"Buy time. I will send you the equipment that you need, but it needs to be properly installed."

"By the Light, I will do whatever it takes to stall her as long as necessary!" the Duke exclaimed. "Countess Zasod, head to the ritual chamber. I have a plan."

Last edited: Dec 3, 2016

Cornering the Duke

A warm updraft tore at Kivith's robes as he descended the spiralling staircase, keeping close to its outer edge and well away from the gaping abyss at its centre.

In contrast, the blonde girl at his side seemed to relish the feeling of the wind through her hair and stayed closer to the railing than any sane dwarf would consider safe.

Judging from his limited experience, fairies weren't particularly sane. Neither Camilla nor her sisters gave the chasm-like pit the respect it deserved. None of the willow-thin girls seemed to care that their drab grey robes billowed like sails in the wind, ready to carry them off into the darkness.

"So what does the Duke want me for?" the golden-eyed girl asked. She was the youngest of the seven, but he still had to look up at her.

He shrugged. "His Grace merely told me to bring you to the ritual chamber and instruct you in its basic operation on the way, Miss Camilla," he said. In his opinion, there was no need to rely on suspicious foreigners when there were already enough dwarven wizards around. Maybe she knew some rare and exotic spell?

The redhead in front of them harrumphed. "Your Duke is pretty bold to assume that we still want to help him after the endless interrogations and house arrest!" she said, frowning at him over her shoulder.

Kivith blinked. "I thought it was pretty lenient treatment for people like you," he said in confusion.

Anise turned to fully face him, walking backwards as she put her fists on her hips. "And what exactly is that supposed to mean?"

The scowl on her face reminded him that the fairy wasn't only a much stronger magic user than him, but that she was also armed. Coincidentally or not, her hands were very close to the swords at her

hips.

"Well, that- you must admit that you were really, really suspicious! You even admitted that you were doing a task for a Keeper, for crying out loud!"

"Delivering a message! It's not like we could just refuse to her face!" Anise objected, not mollified in the least.

"Also, you claimed you were diplomats from a nation we never had contact with all while dressed like Underworlders!" he continued. Seriously, what did they expect looking like something a Keeper cooked up by attaching giant fly wings to some dark mistresses?

They certainly were glaring at him with enough malicious intent to convince him of that origin story on the spot.

"Dressed like Underworlders?" the green-haired one repeated incredulously.

"It's a honoured and traditional uniform!" Melissa protested.

"Are you blind?" Roselle said as she grabbed his shoulder and yanked to spin him towards her.

He shifted a little, but much less than either he or the orange-haired girl had expected. She was obviously much lighter than him, despite being taller.

With a yelp of surprise, she lost her balance and toppled forwards. The cloth covering her back bulged upwards as her wings pushed against it, unable to spread.

Fortunately for her, Anise caught her in her arms before she could fall down the stairs. A small cloud of glitter rose from their collision.

"This. Stupid. Robe." Roselle vented her frustration as soon as she was back on her feet. "I have had enough of it!" She lost no time grabbing its hem and pulling it over her head, leaving her clad only in the garment that had prompted Kivith's incautious comment.

He averted his eyes. She wasn't a dwarven girl, but still not entirely

unattractive, and seeing so much bare skin might make him blush.

Unfortunately for him, Roselle had different plans. "Look!" she said, gesturing at her body. "Do you see any black? Of course you don't! It doesn't look like Underworlder garb at all!"

"The colour is not the problem," Kivith muttered, wondering when he had lost control of the situation.

"Not th-"

"Roselle, we are wearing those robes for a reason," the eldest of the fairy sisters interrupted, sighing as she indicated the railing with a glance.

Oh, yes, the other point against them, in Kivith's opinion. There just had to be something deeply wrong with creatures that couldn't stand the touch of good, solid iron.

"I'm going to be careful, Dandel," the orange-haired girl said as she stretched her wings. "Ah, this feels so much better!"

"Just don't forget to look before sitting down. Again," Anise said, snickering.

"Oh, shut up!"

"Sisters, quiet," Dandel said, holding up her hands. "Kivith, I have a question about the ritual chamber for you."

"Yes?" he answered, eager to change the topic.

"Does it increase the amount of magic in the air?"

"Uh, maybe as a side effect? It's mainly used to concentrate most of the mana circulating through the city and putting it at the casters' disposition," he explained as best as he could. The exact mechanics involved hadn't come up in his studies yet.

The fairy brushed her fingers through her indigo hair and let out a long breath. "All right, that explains why I'm feeling a little tipsy. Everyone, high-magic environment."

Her sisters nodded and closed their eyes in concentration.

Kivith couldn't tell what was going on, but he noticed that they all looked more glittery than usual when they opened their eyes again.

"Good," Dandel said after a quick look at the others. She flashed a knowing smile at Kivith. "I think you'll be relieved to know that we should all be a little more focused now. Please, go ahead and continue with Camilla's lesson."

"Oh? Yes. Of course." The sooner he completed his task and was rid of these fairies the better. "We stopped with positioning on the circles, I believe? Well, the ascending-"

A loud gong sounded in the depths, echoing through the wide staircase.

His heart skipped a beat. "Oh, no."

"Looking pretty pale there," Tilia said, a hint of concern in her emerald eyes. "That sound means something bad?"

"It's a proximity warning," he answered. His shoulders slumped as he looked at the stairs spiralling down floor after floor until they disappeared in the darkness below. "The enemy is too close already, we'll never make it in time."

"Perhaps we can travel faster." Cerasse looked him up and down with a contemplative look. "You weigh about as much as one and a half of your barrels of beer, correct?"

That sounded about right. "Yes, but what does-"

"Good. We can carry that much." The indigo-haired fairy proceeded to take off her robe, and her sisters followed suit only moments later.

Comprehension dawned, and Kivith's eyes widened in horror. Despite his best efforts, his gaze darted from the girls spreading their wings to the gaping abyss. He took a step away from them. This was madness!

The worst thing was that it could possibly allow him to complete his

task. Duty demanded that he went along with this insanity, and so he settled for whimpering softly as several pairs of hands reached for his limbs.

The dwarven elevator was nowhere in sight, so Ami simply jumped into its empty shaft. Kicking off the masonry, she bounced from side to side as she descended deeper into the city.

"Three more floors," Torian informed her, sounding less certain than usual.

In the monochrome view of her visor's night vision mode, she spotted the exit he had indicated. The doorway was blocked by a thick iron grate.

She had expected needing to go all the way down. Hastily, she extended her legs, managed to tag the wall, and change her course enough to grab one of the bars in passing. She swung so far that she was almost horizontal, nearly losing her grip before she managed to latch on with her other hand.

The grate hadn't even shaken through all this. Forged from high-quality steel to resemble intertwining vines, it was a credit to dwarven craftsmanship.

It would have been a shame to break it – not to mention quite difficult to do from her current position. She would need her Keeper hand to lift it. There wasn't enough room between the bars to accommodate its fingers, so she pulled out mist from her storage, and condensed it into a hand-shaped blob of water around the grate before freezing it.

The resulting hand was more or less stuck in place, courtesy of the bars piercing it, but it could still move vertically.

A mechanism in the wall groaned as she forced the hand upwards, opening a gap between grate and floor that she could swing herself through. The moment her feet touched solid ground, she started running again.

"The Duke has stopped," Torian resumed his commentary. *"Looks like he's bunkering up for a last stand."*

That was good news. She hadn't been catching up as fast as she had hoped, since the dwarfs had turned off the lights again. Apparently, they had decided that they'd slow her down more by making navigation difficult than by fighting her every step of the way. They were right, too.

"Where?" she asked, hoping that there wasn't another temple involved.

"Close to your position. He is in the back room of a complex of casting chambers."

She wasn't familiar with the term and checked Torian's crystal ball.

The Duke was sitting on a large marble throne covered in branching lines of precious gems, frowning at a wizard standing inside of a magical circle in front of him. The designs on the floor were pulsing green with every motion of the mage's arms and occasionally filled the chamber with opaque but short-lived clouds of rainbow-coloured smoke.

"Do you have any idea what he is doing?" she asked.

"I'm not familiar with the spells involved," Torian admitted. *"My best guess is that he's being imbued with powerful protective spells. There are quite a few circuits empowering the central sanctuary."*

To demonstrate, he zoomed out to the much larger room outside. *"For example, the shelter stands in one of the focal points of the large ellipse formed by those sixteen subsidiary circles,"* he explained.

Ami needed a moment to notice the greater design her chief warlock had indicated, since its individual parts weren't all at the same height. The chamber consisted of various plateaus, separated by narrow alleys and interconnected with ramps and stairs. Complicating things further, there were free-standing cylinders that stopped at various heights and never reached the ceiling. She could

guess that those could be raised and lowered to form vertical patterns, but interpreting the current configuration of the chamber was beyond her.

"Have someone keep watching the Duke and inform me the moment he starts doing anything," she instructed.

"As you wish, your Majesty."

She continued on in the direction she had been going, having no need to ask for a route. Her visor was showing her mana streams converging all at the same location, which could only be the chamber. One of them crossed her current path, so she simply followed it.

After running for a few minutes, she reached a closed gate fit for a castle. On her visor, it was so covered in annotations that she almost couldn't see the engravings of dwarven wizards within the metal.

"You are standing right in front of the chamber," Torian informed her.

She absently nodded, keeping her attention on the readouts. The doorway was an impressive weave of shields and barriers that extended out into the walls, demonstrating exactly how much the dwarfs wanted to keep her out.

"Is anyone directly behind that door?" she asked her chief warlock.

"Nobody. There are soldiers grouped around the casting platforms, however."

Brute force had served Ami well so far, and she already had a giant sword that could serve as battering ram. With a casual wave of her hand, she propelled the floating object towards the obstacle to test the defences.

It struck the door with a loud ringing sound and bounced back twice as fast as it had come, spinning as it returned towards her.

"Eep!" She threw herself out of the path of the weapon. It whistled past and buried its tip into a wall, where it remained stuck. Wide-

eyed, she stared at the blade as it vibrated from the impact.

Behind the door, she could hear alarmed shouts and barked orders. Dwarven voices started chanting, directing magic to rapidly recharge the shield her attack hadn't damaged all that much.

It looked as if she would need to break down the defensive enchantments first. The earthquake spell was designed for the task, having components that worked similar to imp picks in stripping a dungeon wall of its defences. She wasn't exactly dealing with a dungeon wall here, but the same principles should apply.

She stepped right up to the gate, carefully examining it and the walls for traps before she put her hand on the cold metal. A simple, undirected quake would get rid of some enchantments, but it might also rain debris unto the guards. However, if she changed her mental frame of reference a little, then she could convince the spell that she was doing a handstand and that the door was actually the ground.

A moment of concentration later, and the heavy gate trembled as if struck. Weakly at first, it bucked harder with each subsequent jerk, and she could feel the ground starting to shake as the wobbling intensified.

Not waiting for something to violently give way, she backed off and moved aside. She felt rather smug about making the gate smash into its own protections with each tremor, gradually battering them down.

Sparks flashed all over the bucking obstacle, and the dwarven voices became more panicked.

"Oh, they don't like what you are doing at all!" Torian commented with audible glee.

In the time it took to break down the door, she looked at his crystal ball. There were less soldiers waiting for her than Count Zatkel had brought, simply because there wasn't as much space in the room. The soldiers were huddling tightly around the casting diagrams, blocking the way to the wizards. Judging from their full-plate armour

and tight formations, these were elite troops that made up with quality what they lacked in quantity.

The magic users themselves were positioned around the chamber in groups of three to six and were facing the door, red-tinged light gathering at the tips of their staves.

Therefore, when the door ripped off one of its hinges, bucked a final time and fell half-way out of its frame, she didn't simply rush in through the gap. Count Zatkel had taught her a valuable lesson about the danger of dwarven wards, and her Mercury Computer was scanning for adamantine, warding patterns, and even fragments of said patterns that could be quickly reassembled.

Finding nothing of the sort, she decided to have an ill-defined Keeper hand, made of only slightly condensed fog, walk on two fingers through the doorway.

An explosion lit up the gap between door and wall, knocking the heavy portal completely out of its bracings. It skidded down the hallway, striking sparks as it dug scratches into the stone.

Taking advantage of the attack's bright flash, she dashed towards the dissipating flames. With her opponents hopefully blinded, this was a perfect opportunity to cross the threshold under the protection of a freshly cast shield.

She had barely entered the chamber when the numbers scrolling across her visor turned red, warning her about the oppressively powerful protection spell layered over the terrace-like plateaus stacked before her. Magical power so thick it tinted the air blue outlined a solid dome that covered the wizards as well as the soldiers.

"Fire at will!" someone in the back shouted.

Her shield rippled from an impact, and two flashes right behind her kicked up dust. Fortunately, most of the wizards seemed too surprised to track her sudden move. In any case, most of them were busy tending to the protection spell.

Involuntarily, she swallowed as she inspected its anchor points in closer detail. Each intricate crystal pattern bundled the incoming mana flows, concentrating them until they rivaled a dungeon heart's output in strength. With eight of those nodes powering the defensive spell, she would not be able to simply brush it aside.

"Torian, report on the Duke!" she ordered mentally as her eyes darted over the forces arrayed against her. He wouldn't be willing to confront her here without a plan, and there were four more currently untapped mana nodes that were making her nervous. Retrieving more spells from storage, she constructed a small barricade from three ice pillars so she had some cover.

"No change in his status, but the other warlocks report that the city has gone completely dark. I assume that all power is being directed to your current location," her chief warlock cautioned.

She nodded, having gotten the same impression. What were the dwarfs hiding underneath their city that could provide that much power, and could she disrupt – she had to move!

Her mist vanished, blown away by a sudden gale. An instant later, the ice barricade protecting her turned into a waterfall that did nothing to hold off the huge bolt of lightning that tore through it.

Some of the electricity was conducted through the ground and raced up her leg making it twitch, but she was no longer close enough to take serious damage. Maintaining her speed, she darted towards the enemies. Their defensive spell, as far as she could tell, wasn't meant to stop physical attacks. If she could slip into one of the alleys between the plateaus, she could avoid most of the incoming fire.

A square pane of force suddenly appeared in her path, conjured by one of the groups of wizards. Like a giant flyswatter, it rushed forward and rammed her. Her own shield failed to cushion the impact, and the room spun around her as she was thrown back.

Wondering when her shield had been broken, she cast a replacement while she flipped herself upright and landed in a crouch. Ready to dodge at the slightest hint of another attack, she tried to figure out what had happened.

A quick glance at the enemy wizards showed her four distinct groups that had hands or staves raised in her direction. It seemed likely that each group had cast a different spell in order to strip a specific layer of her defences.

Experimentally, she released more fog from her storage, fired off a salvo of Shabon Spray Freezing spells in the direction of her opponents, and created a Keeper hand.

Almost immediately, the dwarven wizards started to draw on the mana provided by the chamber. Her fog cloud barely reached car size before it vanished, and her Keeper hand flopped to the ground, splashing her legs and leaving her standing in a puddle.

Her lips parted in surprise. Were they augmenting their perceptions in order to identify and react to her attacks this quickly?

Her freezing spells hit the protective dome and slid sideways, stretching out into rapidly fading smears. The Keeper hand she followed up with evaporated within an instant.

Unhappy with the lack of results, she raised her hand to unleash a bolt of keeper lightning at the magical construct, aiming over the heads of the defenders.

Immediately, several of the wizard formations burst into action. As they intoned their spells, her lightning struck the dome and crawled over its surface without penetrating.

The soldiers right underneath the affected area flinched and ducked their heads, but maintained their formation.

At the same time, the area where she had just been standing filled with multi-coloured bursts of light. Some of the expanding spell effects washed over her mid-dodge, leaving her briefly worried but unharmed.

She bent sideways, twisting out of the path of a greenish beam so bright it made her squint, only to spot a disc of red-glowing energy on the ground where she was about to land. Having only a split-second to react, she hit the spot with one of her stored Shabon

Spray Freezing spells.

The resulting steam explosion scattered shards of ice across the room and catapulted her backwards, away from what looked like a fountain of lava erupting from the floor.

She landed on her side, half rolling and half skidding. Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw glowing staff tips tracking her movement. With a well-timed kick, she propelled herself upwards and turned her roll into a hasty tumble, which lead into a mad dash towards the doorway.

Crackling noises and hisses thundered in the air right behind her as she darted out of the chamber.

She grabbed the doorframe with one arm as she passed it, letting her momentum swing her to the side and into cover.

A pinkish light shot past her and etched a rectangular depression into the hallway in front of the doorway, and the hand that was gripping the doorframe stung.

She jerked the limb back and blinked at the stumps of her fingers. There was an odd tingling sensation while they regenerated as icy digits, with neither fake skin nor gloves covering them.

Back in the chamber, the dwarves were jeering and congratulating each other.

Her eyes narrowed as she heard them celebrate their minor victory. Boosting their morale was unfortunate, but at least she had figured out how they were shutting down her defences so fast. They weren't actually reacting to her actions. They simply had enough mages to hit her with every specific countermeasure they had devised at once.

It was a strategy that could effectively keep her from approaching, unless she tried something new. Alternatively, she could try to wear down the defences by throwing spells at them remotely, but she didn't know if she could afford the time necessary.

"Torian, the Duke?"

"His throne is glowing brighter, I think," the warlock dutifully reported. *"Unfortunately, we have not made much progress figuring out what he is trying to achieve."*

She was certain that whatever it was the Duke was doing, it was in her best interest to not let him finish.

"I see. Backtrack the route I took to get here with your crystal ball," she instructed, glancing at the open doorway.

"As you wish, your Majesty." Torian sounded confused but didn't waste time complying with her order.

In her Keeper sight, she watched his scrying device as tunnels and rooms flashed past, and she assisted him by remotely placing a light spell whenever it got too dark to see. When the view neared the room where the dwarfs had tried to drop the heavy gate on her she interrupted. "Stop, this is the place."

Carefully, she cast additional light spells on the ground level to localise areas not covered by the spell-devouring wards still littering the floor.

The sudden brightness revealed several civilian dwarfs cleaning up the debris. They stared at the glowing spheres in fright and scurried off into the darkness.

Briefly, she worried that soldiers were still around, too, but she couldn't spot any in the crystal ball. She decided to go ahead with her plan, and one of her most experienced imps started moving.

The little creature appeared right on top of one of the light spells, reassured by its presence that she wasn't going to die from a blocked teleportation attempt.

Now that Ami had one of her underlings present, she could observe the area with Keeper sight. Green motes swirled and coalesced into two more of her imps, and she immediately directed her workers toward the chamber littered with coin-sized spell-eater wards.

Working at top speed, the blue-clad imps swept the metallic coins into their bags.

The imps couldn't teleport while carrying the wards, but that didn't stop her from simply using Keeper transport to tuck them into storage. With a chagrined look at the singed tatters of her cloak, she raised her hands to catch the first imp she dropped onto herself.

Snickering, the imp landed feet-first on Ami's head. The creature's cargo jingled as she somersaulted to the ground.

A sudden, tense silence replaced the jeers and taunts from within the chamber. Apparently, the dwarfs had someone watching her.

She was quick enough to grab the remaining imps before they stepped on her and allowed herself a small, satisfied smile as she considered the bulging containers. Even if there were enemy wizards scrying on her, they couldn't see into the bags. Hopefully, the wards would catch them by complete surprise.

"Oh, using their own weapons against them. That's always an admirable classic," Torian piped up. *"Will you require additional troops for your assault, your Majesty?"*

"That won't be necessary," she answered, hoping she was correct about this. Without the interference of enemy mages, she was confident that she could fight her way through the soldiers on her own.

She raised her arms sideways in a T-shaped pose, making sure she stood perfectly straight. If she made a minor error here, the results would be uncomfortable and inconvenient. Were her shoulders in the correct position? Feet at the right angle? She thought so. Exhaling, she closed her eyes and concentrated.

A suit of powered armour like the one she had worn during the reaper duel appeared all around her the instant her senshi uniform vanished into storage. Something pushed against her right elbow, pressing it inwards, but she had been precise enough that she only suffered minor scrapes.

She had left her feet bare due to the impossibility of making the armour appear between them and the ground while she was standing on it, which she remedied quickly by lifting her feet and

completing her ensemble.

Unlike the first version of her armour, this one was conjured entirely so that she could transport it just as easily as her spells. Using gold instead of mana, just like she did for her imps and golems, had made it into the most expensive piece of equipment she had deployed here so far. A necessary precaution to avoid it simply dissolving from blessed water – not that the dwarfs had deployed that against her yet.

Small pricking sensations at her sides informed her that the armour was ready to draw magical energy from her body. With its strength enhancing her own, even the large, two-handed sword she pulled from her Keeper storage felt light as a feather, even more so than she was used to in her senshi form.

She ordered her imps to retreat and approached the doorway. Holding the three bags, she stepped confidently over the threshold.

Streaks of colour shot towards her, curving towards the wards and burning tiny holes into a bag's fabric. Only the spells that created an effect outside of their range remained unaffected.

Moving at superhuman speeds, she turned sideways, letting an orange fireball zoom past her, and then weaved between two slightly slower spells.

Mouths gaped and eyes widened as the wizards saw that their barrage of spells had failed. They paled when they spotted the figure in sleek black armour rushing at them through the dissipating haze of sparkles.

She tore her bags open and swung them, spilling their contents in a wide arc.

The spray of coin-shaped wards passed through the protective dome, devouring a quick-witted spell before it could be completed. The metallic hail rained down on the assembled dwarfs, plinking off metal shields and striking a few of the magic users.

Some of the less alert mages continued casting, and more still-born

spells were sucked into the wards littering the casting diagrams. Other dwarfs were already looking at the ground and kicking at the coins.

She tried hitting the enemy line with finished spells she pulled from her storage, but found that the protection spell still held and tore them apart. Under her helmet, her lips pressed together as she realised she could only rely on her physical advantages.

Her enemies recovered from their surprise with commendable speed. A dwarven commander, wearing a helmet that included sculpted armour for his beard, took a brief look at the perplexed wizards and at the coin-shaped wards strewn about the ritual chamber. "Back ranks, pick up those things and throw them out!" he shouted. "Front ranks, engage!"

She leaned forward to gain more speed, preparing to hop straight over the soldiers and take down the magic users. With a strong thrust of her armoured legs, she launched herself into the air, cracking the floor underneath her boots.

Helmeted heads turned upwards as if in slow motion, bearded faces gaping in alarm as she passed over the shield wall. A halberd was the first weapon to swing up at her, attempting to block her path.

She struck at the long-handled obstacle with her sword, batting it out of her path without losing speed.

Two spears rose to block her flight arc, and she brushed one aside with her hand. She couldn't reach the second in time and crashed into the vertical handle.

Below her, the spear's wielder let out a cry of pain as the force of her impact ripped the weapon from his grasp.

Having lost very little of her momentum, she continued on her trajectory. The formation below her blurred past, and she took note of where she would land among the wizards.

The closest of the robed dwarfs were only now turning to run, and she figured that she could take down at least eight of them before

the soldiers moved in.

A rattling chain whipped against her ankle and wrapped around it. There was a sudden jolt as it extended to its limit and pulled on her leg.

Reflexively, she tensed her muscles to resist the pull.

The dwarf who had snagged her wasn't heavy enough to stop her, but he refused to let go. He was yanked off the ground and dragged on, smashing into his comrades like a wrecking ball.

Anchored by his unexpected weight, she fell short of her destination. With her captured leg extended straight behind her, she landed hard on her knees and hands.

Metal boots clanged as the soldiers turned and rushed towards her. Dwarfs weren't particularly tall, but seen from the ground, they looked like an avalanche of armour ready to crush her.

Thinking quickly, she pushed herself towards them with her hands, turning so she was lying on her back in the same motion.

The move made the chain around her ankle go slack, and she wasted no time brushing it off with a quick sweep of her sword.

By now, the dwarven soldiers had almost reached her. Some were lunging at her, arms spread wide as they prepared to trap her under their bodies.

Still on her back, she pulled her knees up to her chest as dwarfs sailed through the air towards her. Uncoiling like a spring, she kicked up at the two closest soldiers.

Their armour rang like gongs as she struck their bellies and sent them and went flying back into the mass of incoming soldiers.

Sliding backwards from the force of her own kicks, she remained just out of reach of her enemies. With a quick overhead roll, she managed to get herself into a squatting position, her feet back on the ground.

A glancing blow from a thrown spear left a scratch on the rib-like shapes decorating her breastplate, and a thrown net was flying straight at her.

The last thing she wanted was getting entangled and buried under a pile of angry dwarfs. Rising explosively from her crouch, she catapulted herself upwards and rose like an arrow.

Surging forward, the soldiers swamped her former position and readied themselves for her inevitable descent.

At the apex of her leap, she used the moment she hung in the air to reprioritise. The chamber was spread out underneath her, with the door leading to the Duke's sanctuary a good distance farther back. If she wanted to proceed quickly, she needed to eliminate the protective magic that suppressed her own spells. That meant chasing off the wizards maintaining it, rather than going straight for her target.

Unfortunately, she would first have to get away from the group of soldiers she was currently plummeting right into the middle of.

Faces hidden behind the visors of their helmets tracked her as she descended, and the warriors in full plate shuffled back just enough that she wouldn't land on any of them.

Her feet hadn't even touched the ground when blows started raining down on her from every direction. She parried and deflected as many as she could, power armour and senshi enhancements turning her sword into a blur. Still, it couldn't be in more than one place at the same time, and even though she twisted and dodged, some strikes got through.

She was glad she wasn't there in the flesh. Maces shook her with their impacts, war hammers dented her armour and occasionally pierced the ice below, and even the swords and axes shoved her around with each impact.

Despite her vast physical superiority, she had some trouble striking back effectively. While she was competent enough at handling her weapon, she didn't trust herself to hold back enough if she used it to

attack. She swept the legs out from a soldier in front of her and turned to jab her elbow at someone's helmet while he crashed to the ground.

A soldier immediately jumped over the prone body, swinging his mace in an overhead swing.

She backed off, deliberately ramming the soldiers behind her in the process. This turned out to be a bit of a tactical blunder, as she felt arms wrap around her waist.

More dwarfs caught on to the idea and lunged, grabbing hold of her wherever they could as they tried to wrestle her to the ground.

Her helmet rang uncomfortably loud as she headbutted an attacker who had wrapped his arms around her neck. He slid off, and she gritted her teeth when another immediately jumped to replace him. At least nobody could effectively attack her while she had dwarven bodies draped all over her, but she couldn't allow herself to be restrained.

Time wasn't on her side. Everyone she wasn't fighting directly was sweeping the spell-eater wards away, and she didn't want to find out what their wizards could do while she was unable to dodge.

"Where are the chains? Hurry before she breaks free!" someone shouted.

She took this as her cue to leave. If they thought the weight of a few dwarfs was enough to stop her, then they were still underestimating her strength. Even with them hanging off her, she managed to rise and stand straight. Slowly at first, she started to spin in place, dragging the soldiers on top of her along.

As she picked up speed, their feet left the ground. One by one, they lost their grips as the centrifugal forces tore at them until only two remained.

The last two were screaming as they whistled through the air like flails, unable to get loose because she had gripped their hands and wasn't letting go.

Their metal greaves and boots smashed into their comrades as she spun like a top, forcing everyone nearby back or to the floor. Soon, every enemy within reach was either down or ducking underneath her improvised weapons, and she released her captives.

With startled yells, they were flung into the ranks of the soldiers encircling her.

Having cleared her immediate vicinity of everyone who could hold her down, she leapt towards the closest half-pillar. This time, she was ready as more nets and chains lashed at her, and nimbly avoided the restraints.

A wizard was hurrying down the ladder at the pillar's side. His eyes widened in fright as he suddenly came face to face with the red-glowing slits of her helmet.

With a quick swipe of her hand, she brushed him off the ladder, mentally apologising. She hoped his landing wouldn't hurt too much. At least, it would result in lesser injuries than her armoured body colliding directly with him. She slammed against the stone, held on tight, and slid partway around it. From this new position, she leapt off at almost a ninety-degree angle to her original trajectory.

Below, suits of armour clanked against each other as the dwarven formation skidded to a halt in order to follow her unexpected change of direction.

Her quarry was one of the chanting crews maintaining the protective dome. The colourfully-clad men and women saw her arc over their guards and stopped chanting.

She landed in the centre of their formation, on top of the intricate glowing lines of the arcane symbol they had been tending to.

The magic users were already scattering like scared chickens, revealing hairy calves as they lifted their robes so they could run away faster.

Instead of chasing them, she raised her weapon and brought it down hard on the crystalline symbol instead.

Stone cracked and splintered, and carefully-shaped mana conduits spilled their contents into the furrow her attack had left. It flared up bright like a lightning bolt and melted, scorching and blackening the surrounding lines.

The soldiers she had jumped over were still hot on her heels. A wizard who had fled towards their charge yelped, ducked, and curled up in a ball as the metal-clad horde jumped over him on their way towards her.

Fighting them again wouldn't bring her closer to her goal. With a running start, she leapt again, somersaulted in mid-air, and hit one of the half-pillars feet-first. Bouncing between different pillars, she quickly reached the next node she intended to attack.

As before, most of the wizards were unwilling to face her without their magic available. Only an elderly witch, her wrinkly face distorted in rage, swung her staff at the fast-moving blur that was Ami's form.

She dodged to the side, not because she felt threatened, but for fear of the weapon bouncing off her armour and hurting the frail-looking woman. Unwilling to attack her, she placed her palm on the witch's stomach and walked forward, awkwardly shoving her away from the arcane diagram.

Undeterred, the old woman proceeded to whack her on the head with her staff over and over again, cursing her with language so coarse her cheeks grew hot.

The elderly lady's presence was convenient in a way. The soldiers didn't throw any of their entangling weaponry for fear of hitting her, which gave Ami a few moments to inspect the diagrams on the ground.

Even with the banging of the staff against her helmet distracting her, she quickly deciphered the rough meaning of various lines on the ground. She pulled her sword back and aimed at one particular junction, ready to test her understanding.

Her elbow accidentally hit the old witch, sending her to the ground.

Ami winced at the soft crack she heard, but proceeded to stab her weapon into the design.

Just as she had hoped, the severed conduits spewed forth a spray of green mana that dissipated harmlessly in the air. One more power node offline.

Satisfied, she side-stepped an attempt from the crone to trip her and decided on her next target.

A hard blow to the back of her right knee made her leg buckle just as she was about to jump.

She staggered and turned her head, fast enough that she still saw her attacker retract his leg from his flying kick. While she recovered her balance, she whirled and struck at him.

Grunting with effort, the dwarf let the blow slide upwards along the edge of his own sword, steering it away from his body. He needed to put his free hand on the flat of his blade to steady it, but it was still an impressive feat of strength. Unlike the rank and file of the soldiers pursuing her, he was wearing light leather armour reinforced with metal plates in critical locations. With a lightning-fast twist, he kicked an object on the ground behind him.

She threw herself aside as the net flew towards her, spinning and unfolding. Her opponent was faster than the dwarfs she had fought so far, but she was faster still. Her arm blurring, she darted forward, only to spot movement behind her.

Metal screeched as the blow from the huge axe glanced off her armour, leaving a furrow behind her right shoulder. The brief moment of distraction was enough for her initial attacker to lean aside and let her jab pass.

In contrast to the attacker in front of her, the fighter at her back looked like a knight in heavy plate armour. Nevertheless, he moved almost as fast as some of the stronger vampires she had fought.

A flurry of attacks rained down on her from both sides, and the clash of metal against metal turned into constant ringing noise as she as

she whirled and spun to deflect both of her opponents' weapons. Even a horned reaper would struggle to defend himself against the frenzied combination attack, but she managed to always stay a step ahead of her attackers.

Her sword blurred, tracing silvery arcs through the air as it intercepted her opponent's weapons. She was on the defensive, yes, but with her senshi enhancements on top of her powered armour, she didn't feel pressured particularly hard. Already, she could hear her the two dwarfs breathing harder, and their strikes had less and less strength behind them.

Nevertheless, the two champions had managed to monopolise her attention for a few seconds. Their allies took the opportunity to climb after them over the various platforms and to take up more advantageous positions.

When she glanced around, there was a wall of soldiers with nets, chains and hooks ready to keep her from advancing towards the next anchor point of the protection spell.

She pondered her chances of jumping past without getting ensnared, and found them lacking. With a sudden dash forward, she went on the offensive.

Her lighter armoured opponent grunted in surprise when her free hand shot past his blade with a lightning-quick grab and latched onto the bottom of his breastplate. His grunt turned into a strangled gasp when she yanked him upwards, one-handed, and threw him over her head like a javelin.

His comrade took a moment too long to decide between catching his ally and getting out of the way, and the thrown dwarf slammed into his angular chest plate.

Before her improvised projectile could slide completely to the ground, she was already in front of her staggering target. As he boggled at her speed, she grabbed the wooden handle of his axe, immobilising it.

Armoured fingers closed into a fist, crushing the wood trapped

between them into a splintery pulp. With nothing to hold the head of the huge axe up, it plummeted to the ground.

In passing, she kicked it aside with her knee as she stepped on the moaning warrior on the ground. She felt bad about that, but he had been aiming his sword at a vulnerable knee joint.

An armoured gauntlet with spiked knuckles rocketed right at her face.

She ducked underneath the punch, rammed her shoulder into the disarmed warrior's chest, and kept going. Half dragging, half lifting the champion, she kept accelerating, hoping that his heavy armour would protect him from what she had planned.

The dwarven champion was as tall as she was, but wider, even with her armour. Chains and snares clanked against his back as she ducked her head and sprinted straight at the soldiers barring her path.

She hit their line like a bowling ball. Screaming soldiers toppled left and right as she bulldozed her way straight through their ranks, internally wincing at every cry of pain.

Then she was through, with no more bodies between her and the wizards around the symbol. Their eyes widened and the determination fled from their faces as they stared at the chaos behind her. After a moment of hesitation, one of them charged at her with a feeble war cry.

Her boots struck sparks on the ground as she braked, unwilling to hit the unarmoured magician with full force. She winced when the champion jerked in her grip, accompanied by a soft thud and a yelp of pain.

The other wizards held their ground on the symbol, their staves shaking in their sweaty fingers as they took up fighting positions.

She discarded her living shield and swept her gaze over the arcane diagram on the ground as she advanced.

Her helmet briefly faced one of the mages directly, and he flinched.

Clearly, he was aware of just how little he could do to stop her without magic, but also unwilling to back down. Then again, there was no telling what surprises they were hiding within their intricately carved staves.

She wasn't going to take them lightly just because they obviously weren't fighters. Ducking and weaving between their attacks, she rushed right into their midst. It didn't take more than an open-palmed shove to toss one after the other away from their diagram, towards the soldiers chasing her.

With the wizards no longer directing the flow of power, only five nodes that supported the protective spell remained. This time, however, she wasn't going to merely render the node inoperable. By now, she had finished her mental math and come up with a working theory of how the arcane symbol functioned, and she had an experiment in mind.

Using her sword as a chisel, she made a slight alteration to the looping lines that allowed the wizards to draw power when they stood within them.

In response, mana fountained upwards from the circle she had modified, rising towards the ceiling as a pillar of brilliant green light.

The incoming soldiers hesitated, shielding their eyes against the glare that was reflected by their armours. "What the- "

"Get over there, now!" an old wizard on top of the highest platform shouted. "Quickly! Destroy the symbol!" he added, speaking so fast that spittle flew from his lips.

She chipped away at the diagrams within a second circle, causing another pillar to join the first.

Nobody looked particularly eager to charge her while she stood between the two emerald geysers, sword at ready and visor glowing crimson.

"…kind of don't want to explode," someone muttered.

"It's just a leak, you fools," the old wizard raged. "The only thing

dangerous about it is the way it wastes the magic we need to protect you from her spells! Now *do something*!"

"Did I stop whatever the Duke is trying?" Ami messaged Torian, happy to get independent confirmation that her analysis of the magical diagram had been spot-on. Now she only needed to defend it while it drained away the power intended for the remaining nodes.

"His throne remains garishly incandescent," he answered, and a little less confidently, he added *"We are starting to suspect that it's actually not connected at all to the casting chamber's circuitry."*

She frowned at the news even as she brought up her sword to fend off a charge from the no longer hesitant soldiers. Gripping the weapon near its tip with her free hand, she held it like a horizontal bar as she rushed forward to meet them.

The collision sent her staggering backwards, as she hadn't gained enough momentum to make up for the fact that her opponents outmassed her several times. Still, she hadn't been driven back all the way to the node, and the three foremost soldiers she had crashed into had come to an abrupt stop.

Only the press of the bodies behind them was still pushing them forward as they crumbled to the ground, turning into an obstacle for their comrades.

With the soldiers in the middle of the formation slowed down, those on its flanks moved around the congestion and reached her first.

She slammed the flat of her blade against the foremost soldier to her left, throwing him back into the ranks and collapsing that flank. At the same time, the force of her blow sent her skidding backwards, making her wish she had a way to counteract her lack of mass. *"Torian, make a note to research a flight spell I can use when I'm not in my own body,"* she messaged her chief warlock.

"It shall be my pleasure, your Majesty," he replied. *"Also, someone is trying to sneak past you!"*

Looking away from the right flank, where she had just smashed

three opponents to the ground with downward strikes, she spotted one of the champions she had defeated earlier. It was the lighter-armoured one, swinging from a grappling hook attached to one of the half-pillars behind her.

He was holding a round object with a lit fuse in his free hand. With a casual-looking twist of his hand, he tossed it right at the two glowing mana fountains.

Abandoning her holding action, she dived towards the projectile as it arced towards the diagram. Her eyes traced the small black silhouette as it passed the brilliant backdrop of the mana fountains, and she desperately batted her sword at it.

There was clinking noise, and the bomb went flying off. The manipulated node was safe and continued draining mana from the others.

She let out a relieved breath, then cringed when she realised she had no idea where the explosive would land in the populated chamber. Hopefully, its owner had taken the presence of allies into account. Now, which soldiers had gotten close enough during this distraction?

Another clinking noise from above drew her attention back up.

A spinning knife glittered in the green light as it descended from where it had collided mid-air with the bomb. Which was bouncing back towards the diagram and straight at her.

She shifted her gaze away from the almost-burned fuse and onto the lightly armoured champion, still swinging on the rope. His arm remained extended from his throw, and she imagined him grinning smugly under his helmet.

The bomb exploded while she was leaping toward it.

Blinding light and fire enveloped her and flung her away. Momentarily stunned by the noise, she didn't react as her back slammed into a raised shield.

As soldiers pounced on her and dragged her down, the green

brilliance filling the room guttered out.

Darn it! No! This had been her chance to quickly regain the use of her magic and end this! The scattered spell-eater wards still stopped her from spellcasting, but it was the dome-shaped enchantment that provided general protection against the finished spells she had brought.

With the leak plugged, the other nodes would quickly regain full strength. They hadn't been weakened as much as she would have liked, but she had to either overwhelm them now or to go after each of them separately.

"Get her armour off!" Someone shouted, and one of the dwarfs kneeling on her chest started tugging at her helmet. Losing it would be a problem, since it housed the armour's control elements.

In fact, the damage to her power armour was slowly adding up. Some of its joints were creaking after the explosion, which was enough to make her reach a decision.

She concentrated and unleashed more of her stored arsenal into the dome than she would have liked.

A small, fiery sun appeared above and smeared out into a spiral - the brief-lived effects of a firestorm spell. Bubbly streaks of grey and azure joined it as Shabon Spray Freezing attacks popped out of storage and hung like snowflakes in the air as they collapsed. Ghostly outlines of Keeper hands flashed into existence and winked out again almost too fast to see.

The dwarves, deeply disturbed, huddled closer together as she kept up her bombardment and prolonged the spectacle. Their mutters grew more worried as the blue tint in the air grew clearer.

A many-voiced cry of pain echoed through the room, and the wizards around the still functioning nodes grabbed their heads.

At the same moment, the liquid for a Keeper hand successfully manifested above Ami, who was too distracted to take control of it.

She sputtered in surprise when it crashed down on her, the short-

lived waterfall washing her away along with the dwarves that were pinning her down. Success! With a surge of elation, she sat up amidst the sputtering dwarves, dragging along the particularly tenacious warrior who insisted on keeping her in a headlock.

Somehow, she wasn't surprised to see that it was the champion she had been using as a shield earlier. His determination was admirable, but she still froze him to the ground before prying his arm away from her neck. She also addressed a freezing spell at his bomb-lobbing comrade before moving on, just to make sure he wouldn't inconvenience her again.

Now that she had her powers available, getting past the rest of the defenders was more or less routine. Hide in magical fog, use Keeper hand to clear a path, and freeze it into an icy obstacle where appropriate. Soon enough, she stood in front of the door of the Duke's sanctuary.

To her left and to her right, dwarven soldiers trapped behind frozen barriers shouted threats at her, while in front of her, the door frame was on fire from all of its wards against evil burning out.

Prepared for the worst, she removed her helmet's metal visor, replacing it with the one provided by her Sailor Mercury transformation instead. *"Torian, any more info or warnings?"*

"Nothing, my Empress. Be aware that the throne looks fully functional, whatever it's supposed to do."

Well, it seemed she would have to scan it personally. With a determined step forward, she reached for the door.

Metal crumpled and bent under her fingers, and with a short yank, she almost ripped the door off its hinges. Purplish smoke escaped from the opening.

She entered, her stride unbroken.

There was a wizard in the back of the room, facing the entrance with wide eyes. He held his hands up protectively, backing away as far as the walls let him.

"It wasn't locked, you know," the figure on the throne commented drily, far less impressed than his court wizard.

"Duke Libasheshtan," she said, inclining her head slightly in greeting. It was the polite thing to do and let her have a good, clear look at the glowing throne.

Nothing she saw was reason for alarm. In fact, she got the impression that its enchantments didn't do anything besides glowing.

Mildly confused, she raised her gaze. "I'm glad to finally-"

She blinked and went completely still for an instant as she processed her visor's readings, and then angrily pointed a finger at him. "You- you are not Duke Libasheshtan!" she accused the dwarf on the throne, whose real face she could see through the superimposed illusion of the Duke's features.

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Hunt's End

"Torian, that's not the Duke!" Ami called out mentally, her finger still pointing at the disguised dwarf on the throne.

Her chief warlock's expression turned eerily similar to that of the imposter. His eyes bulged in surprise as the blood left his face, and a thin sheen of perspiration glistened on his forehead. *"What? But- Please excuse me for a moment while I shout at these incompetent fools!"*

He spun, robes swishing around him, and stomped towards the warlocks seated behind their crystal balls. Those who spotted his rapidly-reddening face ducked their heads.

The figure on the throne before her swallowed repeatedly and audibly, drawing her attention back to the chamber. "Empress Mercury," he said, speaking very slowly. "W-why would you deny that I am the Duke?"

"I can see your real face," she answered flatly.

He flinched and lowered his eyes even as the hands gripping the throne's armrests started shaking.

She dismissed him as a mere distraction, just like the glowing throne. The way he had been dragging out his sentences would have convinced her of that if she hadn't been certain before. Instead, she focused on the prime suspect for the Duke's disappearance.

The wizard was standing still like a statue, trying to blend into the background. It would have worked much better without the eye-catching gems encrusting his tabard, which glittered in the light from the throne.

Hoping to get some use of her title, she stood straighter and tried to project authority. "Wizard. I, Empress Mercury, demand that you tell me what you did with Duke Libasheshtan!"

His mouth opened briefly, then closed with an audible snap as he fought down his reflexive reaction. His eyebrows settled into a stubborn frown even as his grey beard shook like leaves in the wind. "I will not betray my Liege! I am under no obligation to answer your questions, invader!"

Well, so much for that idea. Perhaps she should start practicing regal poses? In any case, she needed to figure out what had happened quickly. The dwarfs outside wouldn't remain trapped behind her ice forever.

"Your Majesty?" Torian interrupted *"I had your wretched minions scry on the Duke again. They can only tell that his current location is too dark to identify it."*

Progress, but her warlocks should have already been watching him at all times. She made a displeased noise.

The dwarven wizard whimpered in fright and pressed his back harder against the wall.

"How did you lose him in the first place?" she asked Torian.

"I got Rilgiar to admit that he briefly lost sight of the Duke in the purple smoke," he answered quickly, sounding rather happy that he had found someone to blame. *"He insists that he repeated the scrying, but I'm sure he didn't bother when he saw that someone was still sitting on the throne."*

That sounded plausible, though she wasn't convinced the other warlock was guilty of not doing his job properly. Scrying again would have shown the room with the imposter if the real Duke was still in it. *"Could the Duke have sneaked out?"*

"The door only opened once, to let him in. Perhaps there are other exits?" Torian guessed.

"There aren't." She had already scanned the room, but let her gaze pass over the rune-covered walls a second time. Again, she found no hint of secret doors, illusions, or other concealing magic. *"Unless…"*

The throne's occupant tensed as she strode past him, completely ignoring his presence. There was a sink-like basin in the back of the room, its stone surfaces discoloured and stained with potion remnants. The drain at its bottom looked dark and uninviting, but large enough for a small animal to pass through.

Hesitating only for a moment, she turned to look back at the wizard. *"You transformed him into something tiny, didn't you?"* she asked.

His face remained so impressively unmoving that she briefly wondered if he had used a spell to paralyse his facial muscles. Nevertheless, he couldn't hide the sudden increase in his heart rate from her visor.

Now certain that she was on the right track, she wondered how she could find the Duke if he had fled through the drain. Wait, rats had a great sense of smell, didn't they? She transported one of the rodents she had brought, dropping it onto her cupped hands. *"Torian, I need the spell-eating wards gone. Have the warlocks target my golem body with messages, stop the moment I possess the rat."*

"At once, your Majesty."

Both the wizard and the dwarf on the throne jerked in surprise when they heard the sudden, rapid-fire pings of bursting metal from outside.

Unlike them, she knew what was about to happen. She still winced when the last ward broke and a burst of messages filled her head with incomprehensible noise. Quickly, she cast her possession spell to flee from the cacophony.

A tendril of darkness shot from her visor into the rat. There was a moment of disorientation as her perspective switched, and then she felt cold metal under her feet and was looking up at a giant suit of armour. She sniffed the air, borrowing the rodent's superior sense of smell.

The scent of sweat and what she assumed to be dwarfs was thick in the air – no surprise there – and strange, almost chemical odours rose from the basin below. It irritated her nose.

Sneezing, she jumped down into the sink and nosed the drain. The smells didn't improve down there, but she caught a hint of something new and different. Fur, or perhaps some animal she couldn't identify. Not a rat. With a resigned sigh, she jumped into the opening.

A renewed protective dome filled the ritual chamber with its bluish glow, reassuring its occupants. The soldiers were less tense as they swept away debris in small, organised groups, and the wizards were melting ice and regrowing broken crystal without looking over their shoulders every few seconds.

The relative calm ended when one of the soldiers, his head bandaged and his helmet in his lap, raised a shaking finger towards the entrance and shouted "She- she's back! With minions!"

Dwarfs cursed and turned to face the entrance, their brooms and tools clattering to the floor as they went for their weapons.

Camilla flinched as she stared into the twilight that was suddenly filled with crossbows pointed in her direction. Perhaps it hadn't been such a good idea for her blue-haired sister to walk at the front of the group?

Melissa stood frozen like a startled deer in front of the doorway, one leg raised to cross the threshold. She gulped and raised her hands very, very slowly.

"Stand down! False alarm!" a loud, imperious voice echoed from within the chamber. A tall dwarf strode into view, his face covered by a mask-like helmet.

Camilla allowed herself to breathe again as the weapons were lowered. Her gaze flicked over to the dwarven officer and briefly lingered on the dents in the sculpted iron beard jutting out from his chin.

"Last time I checked, the Dark Empress had brightly-glowing red eyes and no wings," the officer continued in an acidic tone of voice.

The soldier who had shouted hung his head. "Lieutenant, I was-"

"Head wound. Impaired vision. I know," the masked dwarf interrupted. "I also know that you are supposed to be resting. Back to the healers, now!" he finished loudly.

"Yes Sir!" the shame-faced dwarf jumped to his feet and saluted, almost hitting his bandages in the process. On wobbly legs, he hurried off towards the right side of the chamber.

"The rest of you, return to your duties!" the Lieutenant said, swinging his arm in a shooing motion.

The soldiers relaxed their posture as they sheathed their weapons and opened their visors. Chatting among each other, they walked back to their duties, glancing occasionally back at the group of fairies.

Camilla didn't really know what to think of their lingering gazes. There was curiosity, but she also saw frowns, wrinkled brows, and some barely-disguised leers. It had to be their uniforms, she decided, thinking back to Kivith's reaction. These dwarfs had some unhealthy issues if they associated a little exposed skin with evil.

"You must be Ambassador Camilla," the officer addressed her, having approached her group while she was thinking. "I am Lieutenant Idenodur, overseeing the local troops in Duke Libasheshtan's stead."

"Pleased to meet you," she replied, inclining her head.

Her sisters did likewise as they said their own greetings, and Kivith bowed deeply, putting one hand on Roselle's shoulder to steady himself.

"Likewise. Please excuse the unfortunate reception, tempers are still running high after the recent attack," Idenodur said.

"Oh, that's all right, no harm done. Um, does he need help?" Camilla said, pointing at the dwarf with the bandaged head. "I can heal."

"Thank you for your offer, but there's no need. Our own healers will

tend to him shortly." He tilted his head to the side and focused on Kivith, who was leaning on Roselle for support. "Will your guide require their assistance too?"

The slouching apprentice looked up when he was mentioned, revealing the greenish tone around his nose.

"He isn't sick, he's just a wimp," Tilia said cheerfully. The green-eyes fairy spread her wings and batted them demonstratively, lifting herself off the ground. "All we did was take him flying-"

Kivith's blood-shot eyes flew open, and he whipped his head around so he could glare at her. "We weren't flying!" he protested in an angry, high-pitched whine. "We were falling straight down most of the way! And you almost dropped me!"

"Hey, you almost squeezed my arm off!" Anise grumbled right back. Her upper arm sported a hand-shaped bruise that was almost as red as her hair.

"Well excuse me for being terrified while falling to my death, you crazy-"

"Ahem." The Lieutenant cleared his throat demonstratively. "Aren't you supposed to take them to Mengolin? Quickly?"

"Yes Sir. Of course." Kivith had the good grace to look embarrassed.

"Be on your way, then," the Lieutenant ordered. "Ladies." With a shallow bow towards the fairy sisters, he turned and strode away.

Roselle, still supporting Kivith, was the first of the sisters to actually walk through the ruined doorway. In passing, she brushed with her fingers over its smoothed, worn-away stone.

Moving right behind her, Camilla turned to gape at a huge, blackened area where the ground looked like a pool of uneven, petrified mush. Meltwater was gathering in the depressions, boiling into steam that irritated her nose.

"Did the Dark Empress do all this?" Roselle muttered as her orange-eyed gaze swept over the devastation.

A wizard standing next to a mostly melted ice block put his drinking flask down and clipped it onto his belt. "Nah, we did most of that. Impressed?" he asked cheerfully, smiling at the orange-haired girl. He pointed at the destroyed floor. "Magma fountain. Helped cast the spell myself. We even forced the Dark Empress to flee from the room, you know. She couldn't handle our defences."

Melissa, who had approached as they spoke, said softly "Then what about the wounded?" She was looking at one side of the room, where healers walked through rows of blanket-covered dwarfs who rested on straw mats.

The wizard had to hop off his platform to keep up with the group and landed in a puddle of water that had cascaded down from his perch. He coughed into his fist. "Well, she couldn't defeat our spells, so she stole a bunch of wards to stop us from using them." His expression brightened. "Still, that didn't break the protections we had already put up. Sure stopped her from killing anyone!"

"That's a relief," Camilla said, feeling a little better than she had ever since she had learned about Mercury's attack on the city. The way she treated her civilian prisoners had led the fairy to consider that, perhaps, the Empress wasn't as bad as other Keepers. It was a silly hope, really, and Camilla certainly didn't want her sisters to lecture her about the folly of it again. Still, well, she was glad nobody had died here. For more than the obvious reasons, that is.

Meanwhile, Cerasse had launched herself up in the air to get a better view at the casting diagrams. She whistled. "This is quite the impressive setup you have here, even with the damage. What caused all those pockmark-like burns?"

"Overloaded spell-eater wards," the wizard as said, looking up at the flying fairy. "Same ones she stole from us. We could have fended her off indefinitely without the stupid things."

Anise straightened and swept her gaze over the chamber that was brimming with armoured dwarfs. "Wait, you are telling us she fought her way through all of those soldiers without using magic?"

A soldier who overheard her snorted. "As if! That fiend mostly

jumped around like a demented leapfrog trying to stay away from us!"

"Really, she did all that while running away?" Roselle asked, gesturing at the rows of prone, bandaged soldiers. Her wide-eyed expression turned into a bright smile. "You must be so relieved she wasn't fighting you seriously!"

"What? No! I mean, that's not-" the soldier sputtered, his cheeks reddening.

A few of the nearby soldiers shot dark looks at the group of fairies.

"Roselle, come along," Dandel interfered, grabbing her sister by the wrist and yanking her onwards She faced the annoyed dwarfs and bowed apologetically. "Please excuse my sister, she meant no offence."

"Ah, there you are! Took you long enough!" a voice called out from a platform above.

"Master!" Kivith replied, straightening his shoulders.

"And there's my cue to get back to work," the wizard who had trailed after the group said. He ducked into one of the side passages and darted away as the court wizard approached.

Mengolin was wrapped in a thick blanket, and his shoes made sloshing noises with every step, leaving wet footprints on the ground. "Ambassador, Ambassadorial Guard, I wish I could have met you under better circumstances." He shivered and wrung water out of his beard.

Camilla bowed in turn. "Likewise." She took in his soaked robes. "Um, Anise could cast a drying spell on you if you are uncomfortable."

"Later, we are pressed for time," Mengolin declined. "We didn't manage to stall the Dark Empress for as long as we expected, and now she's hot on the Duke's heels. We need to act quickly to foil her plans."

"Of course. What do I need to do?" Camilla asked. She had been wondering for some time why they needed her specifically if they had so many wizards already.

"It will be easiest to show you. Please follow me." He spun so fast that he dislodged a spray of droplets from his clothes. A few of them landed on Kivith.

"Master, what happened to you?" the apprentice asked as he hurried after the older dwarf.

"Tried to capture the body the Dark Empress left behind. She objected."

"W-wait, it's still around?" Kivith stopped abruptly.

"It disappeared after I let go of it," Mengolin said. "We are pretty safe here with the protection dome up again."

"Oh, that's one of the focal points of the ellipse formed by the magic circles, isn't it?" Cerasse asked from above as the group approached a particularly dense knot of diagrams on the floor.

"An astute observation," Mengolin praised the violet-haired fairy.

A dwarf wearing a sleeveless shirt awaited him, powdered stone clinging to his sweaty arms. He put a chisel down and bowed. "Court Wizard, I have just finished the final adjustments."

"Wait, you made a statue of the Dark Empress?" Anise asked, pushing to the front of the crowd to get a closer look at the sculpture.

It wasn't a complete statue, or even a bust, but only a head carved from a block of marble.

"I would have preferred the golem's head, but this should be a close enough likeness for our purposes," Mengolin said after examining the sculpture. He took a small, cloth-wrapped object from a nearby padded box and peeled off its cover. Inside was a glass replica of Mercury's visor, which he affixed onto the carved face.

The sculptor took a step back and examined the effect. "The

resemblance is uncanny, if I may say so myself."

"Yes, you did great work. Wouldn't you agree, Ambassador Camilla?" Mengolin said.

The blonde tilted her head to the side. "Well, yes, it's impressive." She paused. "I haven't ever seen her with a scary scowl like that, though."

"Artistic license," Mengolin said. "In any case, we are confident that we got its appearance right. The next part is where you come in, Ambassador. Dugin!"

The artisan approached when he was called, straining from the weight of the large bag he was carrying in front of his belly. He deposited on the workbench with a faint thud.

It slid to the side, and a collection of aquamarine objects that resembled open books spilled out.

"What's that supposed to be?" Anise asked as she circled the collection of strange objects. Her nose wrinkled in disdain as she spotted variants of the Mercury symbol decorating the 'covers'.

"Your sister told us that the Dark Empress once showed her the magical artefact she uses to gather knowledge about things. Those are the closest approximations of its appearance that we could manage based on her descriptions." Mengolin explained. He started flipping the stone computers the right way up so that their glass screens were facing them.

"They all look a little different?" Camilla asked, poking at one that was definitely larger than the real Mercury computer.

"Yes. Please find the one that looks closest to the original. The greater the similarity, the better the spell will work," Mengolin said with an encouraging smile. "Go ahead."

"Oh!" Cerasse said, snipping her fingers. "You are going to use the similarity as a link to target the real one!"

"Indeed," Mengolin confirmed.

"But," the fairy said dubiously, "your copies are just stone and glass. Unless I'm severely underestimating the amount of magic you can bring to bear with your damaged casting diagram, it won't work. According to all the books I have read, to affect the target, the focus needs to be made of the same material."

Mengolin chuckled. "Just watch, you may learn a trick or two," he said jovially. "Ambassador, please stand over here," he said as he pointed at a looping diagram on the floor.

The youngest fairy approached slowly, carrying one of the fake computers under her arm. She stopped in front of the engraved lines and looked at wizard questioningly. "Why me? Wouldn't someone more experienced be better suited to this?"

"Your memories of the artefact make you uniquely suited to forging the link," Mengolin explained. "I will, in fact, be handling the visor personally, since I got the opportunity to see it up close."

"Oh, that makes sense," Camilla said as she stepped into the circle. "I'll do my best!" she promised, her expression growing determined.

"Still can't see this working," Cerasse commented from the back. "The power requirements to make up for the difference-"

"Shush, you," Dandel said. She walked around Camilla once, examining the arcane sigils on the ground before turning to Mengolin. "When do we start?"

"Best get ready immediately," the court wizard stated. "We need to be able to unleash the spell as soon as we get the signal."

Ami's hair whipped into her face as she plummeted into the darkness, the uneven rock walls just out of her reach. She was spinning around as she fell, and her fluttering cloak got tangled around her head.

Irritated, she brushed the cloth away from her eyes. At her current angle, she could see the ledge of the cliff above, and she caught a final glimpse of the minecart she had just been riding.

It was speeding down the rails, its tub still swivelling back upright after it had dumped her into the pit.

She imagined that somewhere, a very smug dwarf was standing next to a lever, and chided herself for not expecting an automatic unloading mechanism.

The bottom of the pit was rapidly approaching, its floor hidden underneath a large pile of loose ore clumps.

They didn't look as if they would soften her landing. Nevertheless, her golem body should survive the impact and regenerate any damage in short order. It certainly wouldn't be as painful as her rat-body being ambushed by a hungry cat earlier.

She grimaced at the brief memory of claws and teeth tearing into her borrowed flesh. Dying while possessing a real, living creature was not an experience she ever wanted to repeat. Poor animal.

There was a loud cracking noise as she smacked into the heap of fist-sized stone chunks. Droplets of water sprayed outwards, and a few clumps of ore came loose and rolled on top of her prone form.

Ow. As it turned out, belly-flopping into a huge pile of ore hurt even when you only had a thin outer layer of glamoured skin. She decided to lay still for a moment while the cracks in her ice shell mended.

"Well, this is embarrassing," Torian's mental voice commented.

"I'm well aware," Ami replied, sounding a little irritated.

Torian didn't answer immediately. In her Keeper sight, he looked over at one of the crystal balls and saw her sprawled out, half-buried form. His eyes widened, and he raised his hands, palms facing outwards. *"Oh, no, no, no, this is a misunderstanding, your Majesty!"* he said so quickly he would have had to gasp for breath if he hadn't been speaking telepathically. *"I was referring to the situation with the Duke!"*

"Explain," she said, distracted by repairing her body. Injecting water internally with a spell so the golem wouldn't shrink felt weird.

"We reached the wrong conclusions from his travelling speed," he said, drying the sweat off his brow with his sleeve.

She frowned. While her warlocks were unable to see the Duke in the darkness, they could still scry on him and raise the point of view straight up to the surface to get a rough idea of where he was. He had been covering ground too quickly to be moving on foot.

"He wasn't riding a minecart," Torian continued. *"He was a bat. Flying."*

A bat. That made sense. A fast, manoeuvrable animal that could travel without needing light that her warlocks could have used to spot it.

"You know where he is?" she asked.

"Yes, we observed him turning back into his real form as he flew into a temple. It's somewhere under surface square D-19."

Her face fell at the prospect of having to deal with another temple. At least, a building would be easier to locate than an individual. She sat up on the shifting ore and quickly entered the coordinates into her computer.

On her visor, a vertical bar appeared, indicating the volume of space that hid her destination.

"I'll remotely scatter colour-coded lights in the target area. Report to me at once when you spot one," she instructed.

Large, rectangular stone plates formed a decorative pattern along the walls of the side passage. Tiny alcoves at head height fitted seamlessly into the design, but the lamps they held were hidden behind bronze covers. Nevertheless, it was bright enough to see just from the glow of the temple on the main road outside.

Ami listened for hints of danger, motionless except for the last traces of black lightning still playing over her newly-possessed golem.

Hammering noises echoed from afar and a minecart rumbled in the distance, but she didn't hear anything moving nearby.

Cautiously, she leaned past the side tunnel's entrance and peeked around the corner.

To her left, multiple branching tunnels opened onto the main passage, which widened to allow the individual minecart tracks to merge. The single remaining track passed under a marble arch formed by a two storey building.

She clenched her teeth at the sight of the structure, fighting down an unnatural urge to flee. Instead, she swallowed and took a closer look to determine if any of her plans were applicable here.

The temple reached from the tunnel's floor to its ceiling and had tall windows. Silvery shutters were slamming closed, though the deep engravings of winged figures that both decorated and weakened the material made their protective value dubious at best.

Clearly, the elegant building with its thin pillars and ivy-like decorations was a place of worship, rather than a fortress. It didn't look as if it could keep out a determined burglar, let alone a Keeper. Of course, the dwarfs had no intentions to keep her out of a temple.

As she scanned the court and the glowing façade for traps, she felt a small tug underneath her feet. She looked down.

An imp wearing a cloak so large that half of it trained over the floor stared up at her. The creature uncrossed her arms and tugged at the fabric again where it was stuck under Ami's boots.

"Ah, yes. Please move to safety for now," she said as she stepped off the piece of cloth.

The imp huffed and twirled, the cloak billowing as it wrapped around her. Nose up in the air, she somersaulted and disappeared in a flare green.

Ami blinked. Imps experienced enough to teleport on their own were a great boon, but she wasn't comfortable thinking about the implications of them occasionally displaying unexpected quirks. In

any case, she needed to focus on the Duke. *"Is he still in there?"*

"Yes, my Empress," Torian confirmed. *"We cannot currently observe him directly, which strongly indicates that he hasn't left yet."*

That, at least, was good news. Nodding to herself, she stepped into the open and slowly approached the holy building as far as she was comfortable with. Which meant that she stopped at the edge of the courtyard.

She took a deep breath and shouted "Duke Libasheshtan! I, Sailor Mercury, Empress of the Avatar Island, wish to negotiate with you! I'm not going to leave, so just talk to me! Please!"

The Duke being in a temple was problematic, but also predictable. Nevertheless, she wasn't eager to try any of the solutions she had come up with, as she had no idea how far she could escalate without seriously offending the Light. Best to start off with the method that left the temple undamaged.

For a few long seconds, there was no reaction aside from the echo of her voice fading in the tunnels. Then, a curtain on the upper floor moved, right above the top of the archway.

Her hope soared as the door leading out on the balcony opened. Conducting negotiations by shouting across the court of a temple would be awkward, but she was willing to take what she could get.

A dwarf with a long, snow-white beard appeared in the open doorway, leaning on a wooden staff. Not the Duke.

While disappointed, she remained cautiously optimistic. The priest wore a layered robe of white and golden cloth that was far more elaborate than she had come to expect from the rank and file. He wasn't Libasheshtan, but he was clearly a high-ranking member of the clergy. Perhaps he would be acting as go-between?

The dwarf didn't step outside as he met her eyes. "Keeper, Duke Libasheshtan has made it abundantly clear that he wants nothing to do with you," he said with intense disapproval.

"But-"

With his free hand, he traced a large symbol into the air. "Begone, creature of Evil!"

Bright, blinding light filled Ami's vision, and she felt the horrible sensation of holy magic clashing against her. For a nauseating split second, some force was reached inside of her and pulling at every point of her body.

It took her a moment to separate her own revulsion from the disorientation the possessed ice golem was feeling. Almost on reflex, she filled the area with a Shabon Spray fog to protect herself from further attacks and moved to the side.

When she tried to focus on her attacker, she noticed the absence of readouts from her visor that should be projected across her vison.

She blinked in surprise and tapped her earring to dismiss the damaged device, then tapped it again to materialise a replacement.

It was just as non-functional as its predecessor.

She bit her lips. Damage from the priest's spell? Did she need to transform again to fix it?

A sphere of holy radiance tunnelled through the fog towards her, distracting her with waves of revulsion.

She vaulted backwards so she could duck into one of the side passages. Now in cover, she summoned her computer to run diagnostics.

The little palmtop device hummed softly in her grip, but its screen remained dark.

She felt her legs go weak. "Darn it!" she gasped. This couldn't be happening! She needed that computer! How could the dwarfs even have a spell to disable her gear? Had the Light gods figured out how to do it when she was in their temple? But why now? Had she already overstretched the limits of what they were willing to tolerate? But- they had to know she couldn't afford to lose her computer!

That last thought helped her calm down a little before the

ramifications of losing access to her computer could cause her to panic. The device was still working; it simply wasn't displaying anything. Some kind of curse?

She raised her hand to cast one of the general-purpose dispels from her library's tomes, but reconsidered at the last moment. Hitting her magical computer with an indiscriminate magic-disrupting dispel sounded like a great way to damage it further. Adjusting her aim, she hit her visor instead.

Arcs of greenish lightning crawled across her vision, dissolving into sparks. Numbers flickered into visibility so briefly that they might just have been wishful thinking, and then the visor was blank again.

She sighed and considered her options. The quick and dirty solution wasn't working, and she couldn't use her broken gear to acquire the data she needed to fix it.

Her eyes narrowed as she snapped the palmtop shut. She could, however, ask the dwarfs what they had done once she had secured Duke Libasheshtan, who was right over there in the temple.

"Torian, where exactly in the building is the Duke hiding?" she asked, peering through her fog.

"Going by viewing angles alone, he seems to be on the right side of the arch on the lower floor," her chief warlock replied after a moment.

Stepping out of cover, she extended her arm and aimed her palm towards the indicated location.

A cone of mist disappeared as her invisibility spell expanded towards the building. When it struck, a semi-circular section of the wall reaching from the ground to the top floor windows simply vanished.

She squinted as light spilled out into the mists. There was an altar far in the back that she hastily averted her eyes from, since it felt like staring directly into the sun. Her gaze slid over the rest of the palace-like sanctum, dismissing the gleaming marble and jewel-

encrusted furniture as unimportant. Her attention was firmly on the startled dwarfs whirling to face her.

A few priests were kneeling near pews, eyes widened in surprise. The priest in layered robes from before was descending a staircase leading to the upper floor. Finally, Duke Libasheshtan was staring in her direction, motionless, one arm extended towards a cabinet full of elaborate crystal bottles.

The cone of invisible fog hadn't yet begun to drift apart when he shook off his surprise. He tore his gaze away from her and grabbed the bottles, hurriedly stashing them in a padded bag at his side. As he did, he was walking sideways, moving farther away from the outer walls.

The high-ranking priest on the stairway gestured, sending a wave of silvery light towards the wall. He turned his head to meet Ami's red-glowing eyes, his scowl turning into a smirk as the outer wall shimmered back into visibility.

His smug expression died when a power-armoured golem crashed through the closed window, sailing through the cloud of glass shards, plaster, and broken shutters.

The female-looking intruder crossed half the distance towards Duke Libasheshtan before her feet first touched the ground. She lunged at him, thrusting the carpet backwards with her legs.

"Impossible!" one of the priests shrieked, stumbling as the fabric under his feet jerked.

Teeth bared, Duke Libasheshtan backpedalled and reached for his sword.

An armoured hand blurred towards his collar, only to come to a sudden stop with a loud clang.

He suddenly had a great view of the intruder slamming into an amber-coloured wall of light so hard that her fingers bent the wrong way before she bounced off. Gratefully, he inclined his head towards the priest in layered robes, whose raised staff was glowing in the

same colour as the barrier.

The golem started raining lightning-quick punches onto the force field, their ringing impacts echoing through the building and drowning out the new instructions Ami was shouting at her.

She wished the golem would turn and look at her through the ragged hole where the window had been. In the back, she could see the altar radiating the same amber glow as the barrier that split the room into two parts. It certainly wouldn't fall before the armour's gem reserves were all used up.

She tossed a small ball of ice at the golem's back to get its attention just when the high-ranking priest gestured with his free hand.

Some of the golden wind chimes hanging from the ceiling came loose. Like pen-sized javelins, they shot towards the golem and burrowed into its armour, sticking out of it like bristles.

An instant later, the animated ice sculpture toppled sideways, paralyzed.

Ami hung her head in disappointment. That had been her plan with the least amount of collateral damage, but, to be honest, she hadn't really expected it to succeed. Apparently, she would have to quite literally flush the Duke out. As she prepared to freeze over all openings that would prevent her from flooding the building, she tried to spot him through the broken window.

"Your Majesty," Torian contacted her, *"the Duke is trying to escape through the back door!"*

Ami felt a jolt of excitement, and her eyes snapped to the area behind the arch while her Keeper sight focused on her chief warlock. *"Show me!"*

"Here," the chief warlock said, pointing at a crystal ball. *"Note the empty invisibility potion on the ground."*

That sounded as if her visor would be really helpful right now, but she could manage without it. Immediately, she remotely projected a Shabon Spray mist behind the temple, as close to it as she could.

Instead of the mist parting around a dwarf-shaped void, something moving faster than an arrow cut a straight lane through the expanding banks of fog.

"He's no longer in the courtyard!" Torian told her, leaning over his crystal ball. *"He must have ingested more than one type of potion,"* he speculated.

She clenched her fists in frustration. She had been so close! *"Track him! Use the colours to guide me,"* she ordered as she cast a differently-coloured light spell into each of the three tunnels leading away from the temple.

"Understood. Pink," Torian replied.

The teleport-capable imp with the oversized cloak appeared at her side, ready to be possessed so she could get past the temple quickly.

She would not let the Duke escape, not when he was this close. No matter how fast or invisible he was.

The tunnel Ami had been following opened up into larger caverns lined with buildings, not unlike a main street in a surface city. There was even rain in the form of a mild drizzle that dripped down from clouds of steam that gathered under the ceiling.

Ami didn't mind the water at all, as it felt refreshing in the sweltering heat. There were narrow streams of glowing magma trickling down the walls, serving as a kind of street light.

In her opinion, their decorative value wasn't worth the detrimental effects on the room climate. She swept her gaze over the cranes, various piles of ore, and crates of finished metals that cluttered the sides of the road, and slightly adjusted her assessment. If the magma had already been pumped up here to heat forges and furnaces, then it made sense to get the most out of it before it cooled down.

A shirtless dwarven worker didn't hear her approach with all the

hammering and rumbling that echoed through the district. When he finally spotted her, he dived behind the minecart he had been pushing and waited until she had dashed past.

Not all of the civilians who noticed her fled. A group of them were pouring molten metal out of a huge crucible, and they tracked her nervously with their eyes as she hopped over a few crates that jutted into the road and ran past.

That was some courage and dedication to duty she could admire, particularly since it was a duty that didn't involve getting in her way. She spotted a smith move so that his anvil was between him and her, but he didn't stop hammering the bluish metal before him. Adamantine! He was working adamantine! If only she had the time to observe, or at least had her visor to record this!

"Your Majesty, you need to veer left into the next alley, then to the right, then up the stairs onto the bridge," Torian directed her.

She almost overlooked the indicated intersection amidst all the crates, support pillars, and forge equipment. Another reason to miss her visor. She couldn't be sure there weren't traps waiting for her. Just because the civilians were leaving her alone didn't mean that guards had given up on stopping her.

A dwarven woman carrying an amphora-like pot spotted her as she rounded the corner, screamed, and ducked into a hallway.

Case in point, Ami hadn't noticed her arrive. At least up on the bridge Torian had guided her onto she had a better field of view of the twisting maze below. She seemed to be moving towards the edge of the metalworking district.

When she was past the middle of the bridge, her chief warlock spoke up again. *"Now jump off, onto that pile of tiles that reaches almost up to the railing. Yes, that one,"* he said. *"Oh, and the Duke's speed boost must have worn off. You are catching up to him,"* he informed her cheerfully.

The stack of tiles wobbled and toppled as soon as her feet touched it.

With a yelp, she waved her arms to keep her balance and tried to ride the avalanche of metal squares.

It worked for almost a second, but then the soldier who had been lying in ambush whipped a chain around her legs and yanked.

She lost the fight against gravity and fell right onto the pile of shifting squares. Immediately, she rolled sideways to avoid tiles from another stack falling onto her.

Amidst the clanging of metal plating, she almost missed her attacker shouting "Now!"

Behind her, further up the incline, a minecart started rolling in her direction. Its driver's mustache was waving in the wind as the vehicle hurtled toward her, and his teeth were bared in a manic grin.

He had a passenger, a soldier who was pointing a lance at her as if he was a charging knight.

Dodge? She would have to rise and get rid of the chain draped around her legs first. On the other hand, she was lying on a pile of rather thick tiles.

Acting quickly, she propped one up against the ground like a shield and sat behind it.

The lance screeched horribly as it slid over the angled metal. An instant later, the vehicle reached it.

She wasn't holding her shield vertically like a wall, but inclined at a shallow angle.

Instead of slamming into the plate with all of its momentum, the minecart drove over it as if it was ramp, barely losing speed.

The two soldiers screamed in surprise as they went sailing through the air.

With a casual gesture, she tossed the heavy plate aside and stared at the remaining soldier.

Mouth wide open, he stared at her, then at the cart disappearing down the incline, then at her again. He was still gaping in disbelief when Ami stood up, shook the chain off, and resumed sprinting after the Duke.

She was rather irritated that the dwarfs had figured out that a few attackers could slow her down almost as much as large groups.

After running for a few hundred metres, the decorations around her became more elaborate and occasionally featured angels.

She slowed her step, her worry about wards she couldn't detect increasing. *"Torian, the imagery on the walls is getting more religious. Am I approaching another temple?"*

"It's just a cemetery. Well, noble tombs and vaults, really. Pompous, lots of gold and silver. Guess they don't want to get separated from their wealth even in death."

"Why would he flee down there?" she wondered.

"We are still checking," Torian replied. *"At a guess, he expects that door up ahead to stop you."*

Cogwheels rattled somewhere inside the walls as a truly massive metal door, as thick as her forearm was long, slid across the tunnel. It was engraved with so many anti-evil wards that she could feel them from a distance.

She felt as if she was pushing through thick syrup as she approached the obstacle, trying to get through before it could close completely. With a wave of her hand, she put an ice block into the narrowing gap between it and the wall.

It cracked and splintered, and hissing steam rose where the ice touched the white-hot, melting wards. Still, it slowed the groaning mechanism down a little.

With the wards disintegrating, she recovered her full speed just in time to squeeze sideways through the gap between wall and door.

It slammed shut behind her with a loud thud, and there wasn't even

a trap waiting for her.

Taking a moment to place some lights for her warlocks, she surveyed the tunnel before her.

On both sides were vault doors with family crests, inlaid with gold and silver. Statues lined the way, and there were prayers for the dead inscribed on some of the arches.

She ignored those, as she could hear the echo of running footsteps. "Duke Libasheshtan, please wait!" she shouted, on the off chance he would listen.

"Emergency! There's a hero gate down there!" Torian shouted suddenly. *"Check crystal ball nine!"*

Her heart skipped a beat. An escape route! Now his decision to come here made sense. Hurriedly, she followed his footsteps and scattered light spells as she ran.

A dim blue glow appeared near the gateway-like arch set into the wall.

There! Target acquired! Was the Duke carrying a magical pick? If so, a simple block of ice wouldn't stop him. She needed something he couldn't dig through quickly. Rubble!

Her mind focused on the pattern of the cave-in spell. She felt a moment of regret for the priceless artwork she was accepting as collateral damage, and then thunder rolled through the tunnels.

The ceiling above the hero gate cracked and collapsed, burying the exit underneath tons of loose debris.

"Oh, that took the wind out of his sails!" Torian commented. *"He was close enough to get knocked on his arse by the displaced air. I can see his silhouette as a void in the dust cloud!"*

"Good." She smiled at the thought of finally being able to catch him.

"Oh, now he is panicking. Looks like he's trying to hide in one of the tombs."

A heavy door slammed shut just ahead.

Dust sprayed around her feet as she skidded to a halt in front of the building in question. It looked fairly recent, even stained with dirt from the cave-in.

She read the memorial plate set into the wall. "Duke Libasheshtan? If you don't come out, I'll have to damage your family's tomb!"

There was no answer.

With a sigh, she formed a crowbar with her production spell and applied the strength of her golem body.

Unable to bear the strain, the locking mechanism tore apart, and the door swung open. The room before her was dark, but she could see the shadow of a sarcophagus in one corner.

Wary of traps, she placed dozens of light spells in a random pattern so she would hit every room of the building.

"He's still invisible," Torian warned her. *"He went down a secret hatch under the carpet in the next room."*

"Any other exits?" she asked as she stepped through the door, briefly examining the swords on dispay on the walls. She added Shabon Spray fog to the lights to counter the invisibility.

"None. He's trapped like a rat," the warlock said with obvious relish.

She found the carpet he had mentioned and pushed it aside. Even knowing there was a hatch, she had to squat down and brush with her fingers over the ground to spot its edges.

A tiny section clicked as she put pressure on it.

The sound of a bottle smashing against the wall came from below.

"Oh, this is interesting. He threw a potion that is sucking up your mist," Torian said.

She smiled at the thought of the Duke preparing the battlefield for a

final stand. It meant he couldn't get away. She pushed a little harder, and the hatch swung open. Hesitating only for a moment, she jumped down.

"Duke Libasheshtan? It's over. Just come quietly, please," she pleaded, ready to defend herself against his last desperate attack.

Above her, the spring-powered hatch closed.

She raised her hand and froze it in place. "The only exit is sealed shut. You cannot sneak past me. I just want to talk to you, so please cooperate."

"You haven't won. You can't find me before I can kill myself," the Duke said suddenly, his voice echoing so strangely she couldn't track its source.

"N-no! Don't do that!" She blurted out, freezing in place. She hadn't really expected him to take himself hostage. "Please don't do anything rash! I mean no harm."

Where exactly was he hiding? The only movement was the green stain on the wall sucking up the last vestiges of her fog. If only her visor was working!

"Do anything to find me and I'm dead! Understood?" he said, his voice still echoing from all sides.

"Yes," she replied. Of course, the Duke had no way to know she was in constant mental communication with her warlocks. *"Torian, use scrying to triangulate his exact position and tell me,"* she ordered. *"I need the best possible precision."*

"Just a moment. Hmm. Yes. Imagine a straight line between the wide end of the emerald-studded sarcophagus and the right foot of the statue on the wall. Imagine a second line between you and the garish double-headed axe on the wall. He's standing right on their intersection."

"Are you absolutely sure?" she verified.

"To about a hand's span close, yes,"

That was good enough for her. Aiming for the average dwarf's height, she brought a Shabon Spray Freezing from her storage and launched it at the indicated location.

The stream of bubbles travelled about a finger's length after appearing before it collided with something invisible and expanded into a block of ice.

The Duke let out a surprised hiss and flickered back into visibility, his enchantment broken. Only his head was poking out from the ice, leaving his limbs immobilised.

"I'm sorry for that," she said as she finally got to look at him. She didn't feel too much remorse for trapping him like that though, since he had obviously not been preparing to commit suicide.

With an open potion bottle in his left hand and and a sword in his right, he looked ready to lunge at her. "Well, that didn't work," he said, his voice still producing the odd echoes. "Bah. Keeper, start talking. You finally have your captive audience. Not that it will change anything."

"But you haven't even heard yet what I'm offering," she said as she stepped towards him. "You want me gone, I don't want to be here-"

Her vision went black as her golem died. There was a wrenching sensation, and she felt as if she was burning up from the inside. When the room stopped spinning around her, she was sprawled out on the cold ground.

In her real body.

The Duke laughed. "You already lost. This room is an adamantine box, and it just finished sealing."

Last edited: May 6, 2017

Adamantine

Lying on the floor, Ami went rigid as she processed the Duke's words. Her heartbeat quickened. She couldn't be trapped in an inescapable prison fit to hold even a dark god, could she?

Unwilling to take his word for it, she reached for her dungeon heart.

Nothing. She couldn't access its magic, nor see into her dungeon, nor feel any kind of connection to the creatures that served her at all. The knowledge held in her libraries had disappeared just like her ability to move objects into storage. She couldn't even use her Keeper senses on the room she was in.

Shivering despite the warmth of the floor, she pushed herself up. It took a little more effort than she was used to, and she looked down at herself once she was in a sitting position. Oh, she was in civilian form, wearing one of the corruption-resistant outfits based on the fairies' uniforms.

She pulled her arms close to her chest and started rocking in place. If the adamantine was keeping away even the magic she needed to sustain her transformation, then how was she ever going to free herself? Was she completely cut off from the outside world? Wait, something didn't fit.

"How…?" she muttered softly.

Duke Libasheshtan had been watching her with a satisfied grin, and his expression brightened even further. Completely misinterpreting her question, he answered "Oh, it wasn't all that difficult," he said. "A clever mechanism to pour molten adamantine onto the trapdoor. You actually helped it harden faster when you tried to lock me in." His eyes flicked briefly towards the block of ice clinging to the ceiling.

Ami raised her head to look at him, surprised by his explanation. If only he had been that cooperative where negotiations were concerned. "That's, um, nice to know, but not really what I was

wondering about," she said.

In fact, she didn't know how she was still alive. If the adamantine box blocked everything, then she should be cut off from her soul and dead. Either adamantine wasn't as impenetrable as she believed, or there was some weakness in the prison that she could exploit.

She turned to glance at the dead golem lying behind her on the floor.

It looked like an inert ice statue, its glamoured skin having dissolved along with its Sailor Mercury uniform. In contrast, the light spells underneath the ceiling that didn't need an external mana source were still working.

She dismissed the possibility of a hole in the prison. No matter how small it was, mana would have been able to flow in. It seemed more likely that adamantine had some unknown properties. Could she get more answers out of the Duke?

For someone stuck to his neck in ice and imprisoned with a Keeper in an adamantine box, he looked surprisingly smug and satisfied. Judging from his stance, he had been preparing to attack her the moment she appeared in her real body. Despite his plan failing, he didn't look afraid.

She got to her feet. "Duke Libasheshtan, shouldn't you be more worried? You are trapped in here too, and our air supply won't last forever." Which meant she was on a time limit. She didn't know how to determinate exactly how long she had, but the room was several meters wide and deep, so she was at least not in immediate danger.

"My death is acceptable if it keeps my people safe from you," he said. "Which it will, since there is no way for you to get out," he added smugly.

"But, that's completely unnecessary!" she protested, horrified. "I wasn't going to attack. I came here to ask for a truce so that I could leave. With trains and access to the ocean, I could move to an iceberg. You want me gone from your territory, and I don't want to stay," she explained.

"Then you obviously shouldn't have come here in the first place, Empress," the Duke answered.

"I had no choice," she said, lowering her head. "There was no time and no way to move all the people I'm responsible for, and I didn't have any reliable defences against undead sea monsters either."

"And you conveniently acquired some now that you are losing? A likely story. Empress, just how gullible do you think we are?"

"It's the truth!" she protested. Torian had only recently developed his mass undead control spell.

"Even if I believed your tale, stopping you would still be worth almost any sacrifice. You are simply too dangerous to let live. I don't know how you have made the Avatar and the Light reluctant to oppose you directly, but that's a power no Keeper can be allowed to have!"

She hesitated only for a moment. "They leave me alone because I'm not evil!" There wasn't really any point in trying to keep that secret from him. If she managed to convince him, then he would have no reason to tell her enemies. If she didn't, well, she probably couldn't get out of here alive without his help.

A quiet chuckle came from the Duke, his black beard bobbing as it grew louder and louder. He managed to stop himself before it turned into full blown laughter. "That's all you can come up with? I must say, watching a Keeper realise there's no way out and getting increasingly desperate is proving to be as amusing as I hoped it would be. A fine way to spend one's final hours."

"But-"

"In fact, I am going to use this unique opportunity to the fullest and gloat until you finally snap and start torturing me or something," he continued in a cheerful voice.

"I wouldn't-" she protested, frustrated that he seemed determined to martyr himself.

The immobilised dwarf carelessly interrupted her. "Are you, for example, aware that your side is slowly but surely losing?"

"I know my situation doesn't look very good right now…" she admitted reluctantly.

"Not just you. I meant Keepers, Dark Gods, Evil in general."

She blinked rapidly, not sure what to say. That sounded too good to be true.

"You don't believe me? I swear on my honour that it is true. We dwarfs have been working on making this happen ever since the Light first blessed our ancestors with the means to thrive underground," he said, his voice booming with pride.

Not yet sure whether to believe him, she was nevertheless eager to hear more. "Could you elaborate on that, please?"

"With pleasure. You would have to get violent to stop me from talking," he confirmed. "Let's start with the basics. Do you know where the foundation of the Underworld's is?"

She shook her head. "I wasn't aware it had one." Besides, Jadeite's attempts to map that place had never gone anywhere.

"Well, it's right here, about a mile or two straight down," the Duke said.

Involuntarily, she looked at the floor. "You mean the remains of the dark god sealed in adamantine?"

The Duke's eyes widened in surprise, but he nodded. "So you know about that already. Yes, you are correct. That decomposing corpse is the origin of the Underworld; the dark heart that keeps it working."

Conflicting information had kept her from making that connection. "But I thought it was sealed away?"

"If only! The adamantine covers it like a blanket, forming a roughly bowl-shaped shell that's open at the bottom. The dark power trapped underneath creates a chaotic hell that protrudes down into the magma. Currents carry it along, stretching it out into a labyrinth of diluted tendrils. Fortunately, the conditions down there make that labyrinth impossible to traverse, so its worst parts remain

unreachable. Less fortunately, some parts eventually rise back to the planet's crust, where their dark power corrupts their surroundings and births monsters."

Ami nodded slowly, thinking of Metallia's power animating random objects. So far, this sounded fairly believable. "And you are working on closing the opening?" she asked, interested despite her need to search for a way out.

"No, we can't dig that deep because the bedrock doesn't support the pressure. We simply collect and use the filtered mana that seeps through the adamantine."

A jolt of excitement went through her body, and she leaned forward eagerly. "Adamantine can let magic through?"

"That's what I just said." He paused and raised an eyebrow. "Not yours though, so you can wipe that hopeful expression off your face. It's a divine material, it's meant to stop everything tainted by evil. There's no way anything touched by a dungeon heart can get through."

She frowned. "But somehow, the magic of an actual dark god can?" she asked sceptically.

The Duke's shook his head as much as the ice let him. "No, what gets through is mana that has changed so much during random decay that no trace of its original structure, intent, guidance, or allegiance remains."

"I see," she answered thoughtfully. Her own mana, handled by the dungeon heart, apparently failed to meet those conditions. Perhaps there was unaligned ambient magic permitted into this prison that she could draw in for her own use?

"Anyway, there's a considerable amount of free power rising from below that we put to good uses, such as lighting, temperature regulation, healing, transport, food production, and crafting." He grinned at her expectantly.

She felt a little lost. While she now knew that the dwarfs powered

their city with a decaying dark god – not something she had expected, really – she still had no idea which conclusion the Duke was obviously expecting her to reach. "I don't quite follow how this would lead to the side of Evil losing?" she asked hesitantly.

The Duke's grin waned. "I thought that should be obvious. Dark gods gain power from causing evil and lose power from causing good, even if it's unintentional. Using that dead abomination to improve lives, thwart evil, and create great works permanently weakens it, and with it the Underworld!"

She blinked. There was a giant, glaring problem with that explanation. "Shouldn't all the misery and suffering created by the Underworld empower it even more, then?"

Unperturbed, the Duke smiled. "Yes, but, fortunately, evil is self-defeating." He chuckled. "To be more precise, the other dark gods ruin everything. As usual. Only the last god involved reaps the spoils."

She considered her own visits to the Underworld, where every aspect of society and even the unnatural terrain was shaped according to the whims of dark gods. "The dark pantheon claims all the credit," she concluded, her mood improving a little.

He nodded. "And thus, the Underworld withers while adamantine grows. You must have noticed that the more magical evil monsters have become rarer and rarer over the centuries. When was the last time you saw a naturally-occurring horde of more than fifty demonspawn?"

"I'm only fifteen," she replied, still thinking through the implications.

The Duke tilted his head to the side. "Centuries?"

"Years!" she protested, surprised.

"Seriously?" His brow furrowed as he looked her up and down silently for several seconds. "You are as old as you look? If that's the truth, your Majesty, then you are way too young to wear something like that," he said with obvious disapproval.

She felt her cheeks heat up and crossed her arms. "It's a recoloured fairy uniform. Which is used by Light side forces," she defended herself. "It's the most respectable outfit I can wear without the dungeon's Corruption making embarrassing changes."

"In other words, not respectable at all," he replied, obviously enjoying her discomfort.

She turned away from him, unwilling to discuss her choice of attire when she had much more pressing problems. Not that changing into her senshi uniform was a bad idea at all. If adamantine was permeable to non-evil magic, then she definitely should try transforming.

Raising one hand into the air, she called out "Mercury power, make up!"

Her transformation pen appeared, but it remained inactive between her fingers. Insufficient power. Apparently, just having a dungeon heart was enough to contaminate her senshi magic so it couldn't pass through the adamantine.

"Was that supposed to do anything?" the sardonic voice of the Duke asked from behind her after a few seconds.

With a sigh, she lowered her arm and considered her transformation pen for a moment before dismissing it. If her personal artefacts still worked, then her computer should also –

She concentrated, feeling a mild drain before a reassuring weight appeared in her hand. With a relieved breath, she flipped the device open. Despite having used it frequently in civilian form, she had been a little worried there.

To her even greater relief, the screen was bright and functional. Whatever had been interfering with it couldn't make it through the adamantine, at least not while staying a finished and functional spell.

The Duke craned his head and tried to look at the screen. "Oh, is that the thing that reveals secrets to you? Not that knowledge will get you out of here."

"I have to try anyway," she answered, staring at the screen. "Actually, how did you disable it earlier?" Provided she managed to escape from here, she needed to keep that from happening again.

"Simplicity itself," he explained. "A mere sympathetic link to its appearance to replace it with an illusion was enough to confound the Dark Empress. Fairly basic magic, but hard to get rid of with the power of the ritual chamber backing it. Which, by the way, also protected its casters from any retribution you could have brought to bear at range."

She hung her head. "I could have simply changed the screen's appearance with some dirt if I had known how it worked," she muttered, more to herself.

The Duke gaped at her. "But- That couldn't have- could it?" he asked before falling quiet, leaving her to her work.

In the ensuing silence, she typed away at her computer, trying to get a better read on her situation.

The link to her dungeon heart was missing completely, to her surprise and worry. Didn't she need it to stay alive? Then again, underlings had minion bonds too, and they suffered no ill effects when a dungeon heart was destroyed.

Her soul had to remain connected to her by some other mechanism. Which, when she considered the problem from a different angle, made a certain amount of sense. The attraction exerted by the soul on a dungeon keeper's body was so great that merely approaching the site of a lost dungeon heart would lead to being sucked into the dark realm. Forging a direct magical link to the source of said attraction - well, the mental image it brought to mind was a dungeon heart with Usagi's face, the connection as a straw, and the Keeper as a ball of runny ice cream.

Could it be that the dungeon heart was actually shielding the body from the soul? She had so many new questions. This imprisonment would actually be a wonderful experiment if only she didn't have to worry about surviving it.

Deciding that the more metaphysical mysteries had to wait until later, she focused on the walls. Even superficial scans revealed that there was metal hidden underneath a thin layer of stone.

Behind her, the Duke swallowed audibly as she plucked an ornamental double axe off the wall.

Even using both hands, the weapon was too heavy for her to easily swing. She spun in a half circle to make it pick up speed before slamming it against the wall.

The axe bounced off hard enough to jump from her grip. Ringing, it dropped to the ground amidst a spray of pulverised stone and skidded away.

She briefly shook her aching fingers and then brushed over the gash she had made. With a bit of effort, she managed to pry away more of the cracked stone camouflaging the blue-gleaming adamantine underneath.

Her computer told her that the layer was very thin, roughly three millimetres thick, and that her blow hadn't affected it at all.

She turned towards the Duke. "Do you know why my equipment can suddenly measure the adamantine's thickness? I have never been able to do that before."

"Of course you couldn't. It is a holy metal, the power of a dead god of Light in physical form. It may not be alive, but it has purpose. It thwarts evil like you to the best of its abilities."

"And now it can tell that I'm not evil?" she asked, perking up.

He snorted. "Don't be ridiculous. It's probably your artefact that doesn't register as evil now that it's not under the influence of a dungeon heart."

"But- oh, never mind." She couldn't really disagree with her computer's lack of evilness. She kicked at the damaged wall in frustration, and a palm-sized piece of stone flaked off.

The gleaming adamantine underneath it wasn't as smooth as she

had expected. Dense, precise lines formed elaborate wards that reminded her of magnified circuitry.

The complexity of what she was seeing baffled her. "You can't have had the time to make all this!" she gasped.

"Oh, this trap wasn't for you originally," the Duke offered. "Keeper Bartholomeus died in here. We only had to bring it through the hero gate and reassemble it."

She nodded in comprehension. "So it can be opened!" she concluded. For a moment she paused to focus all of her computer's sensors on the trapped dwarf. She didn't want to miss any sign he was lying when he answered her next question. "Can you open it?"

He shook his head. "No. Even if I could and was willing to, I would still fail because the adamantine would resist me trying to free a Keeper." His smile turned downright nasty. "That also means your minions won't be able to coerce anyone into letting you out. There is no hope for you."

He just had to remind her that the people back at her dungeon were in danger too. Clenching her teeth, she wished she knew what was happening back there. Hopefully, Jadeite and the others wouldn't try anything reckless.

The readings on her screen indicated that the padding of the Duke's armour kept him warm under the ice, and there was no shivering to obscure his body's involuntary reactions. There were no indications that he had been less than truthful, either.

"Darn it!" Never mind this being her first attempt at using her computer as a lie detector, the results made too much sense. One didn't leave the means to escape in a prisoner's cell. Forcing aside her increasing worry, she studied the incredibly intricate wards again.

Too much work had gone into them for them to be unimportant, even if she didn't know what they did. Something with space? Her computer couldn't detect anything beyond the adamantine, weirdly enough.

"So, what are those wards for if the adamantine is indestructible?" she asked.

"To stop you from teleporting out, of course. Adamantine can stop many things, but just going around it isn't one of them."

Her breath quickened. A way out! She only needed to find a weakness in the wards and she could free herself! Or, to be more precise, she could get a message about the weakness out to someone who could retrieve her. Being in civilian form effectively stopped her from using her self-teleport.

With a smile, she turned to the Duke. "I can't help but notice that you are being surprisingly helpful."

"Respect for your title, Empress," he grumbled. "Besides, I quite enjoy rubbing in all the reasons why you will never make it out of here alive."

"You aren't worried at all that I will find a way to bypass those wards?" she asked, tilting her head to the side.

"No. They were designed by the Light and inscribed into indestructible adamantine. There is not even a tiny chance that they will fail," he said confidently.

She blinked. "I thought you didn't trust the Light?"

"Watch your words, Keeper!" Duke Libasheshtan bellowed, glowering at her. "I have complete faith in the Light's abilities!"

She shrunk back from the dwarf's furious gaze. "But, it doesn't look like it to me," she hurried to explain. "I mean, it was pretty clear that the Avatar didn't want you to fight me, but you didn't listen."

"That's just being aware of the Light's limitations," the Duke answered, and his red face returned to a healthier colour. "The Light gods are unsurpassed when it comes to creation, nurture, improvement, healing and protection. However, causing destruction is against Their nature, which makes them prioritise defence over offence. Sometimes unwisely so."

"And you thought this was one of those times," she said, letting out a long breath.

"The results speak for themselves. You are here, defeated, while waiting would have let you build up your forces," he pointed out.

"Defeating me wasn't even their objective," she protested. She narrowed her eyes at him. "Also, I'm not ready to give up just yet."

"The adamantine doesn't care, and neither do the wards. Also, it is my great joy to inform you that shielding and protecting an area from travel does fall under the Light's strengths. Nobody is getting in or out of here without being able to work adamantine."

"Which you obviously won't tell me how to do," she said with a sigh.

"On the contrary."

"What?" She stared at him with wide eyes, certain she had misheard him.

He nodded jovially. "Oh, yes. Since the knowledge is completely useless to someone like you, it will simply make my victory so much sweeter."

"I'm listening," she replied in a flat voice.

"Good. First, you need to heat the metal – its melting point is a little higher than that of iron – not that this will have any effect unless the other conditions are also met."

She nodded, taking notes. Difficult in her current position, but not impossible. If she could come up with a way to collect the ambient mana, she could shape it into a simple spell to heat up a small spot of the wall. She didn't need more than a tiny hole.

"Second, you need a priest to infuse the adamantine with holy power, giving it back a semblance of the life it once had," the Duke continued, his smile widening as she paled.

Her shoulders slumped. There was no way for her to do that. Unless… she looked up so abruptly that she startled the Duke.

"What does it take to become an acolyte?"

Mouth agape, he stared at her for almost half a minute. "You know what? I'm not even going to dignify that kind of insanity with an answer. Moving right on. The next step is anointing the metal with some blood." Remembering that it was a Keeper he was talking to, he hurried to clarify "and no cheating, it needs to be from the person who works the adamantine."

That sounded easy enough, provided she could clear the previous obstacles. For only making a tiny hole, she wouldn't need much.

"Now, the adamantine will judge you. If you and your intentions are good, it becomes as malleable as ordinary metal to you. As you can see, that's yet another impossible step," he concluded triumphantly.

For a regular Keeper, certainly. Without the dungeon heart tainting her, she felt she could pass the test. Unless the adamantine objected to some of her more questionable actions in the recent past. Best not to dwell on that now.

"Is that everything that's required?" she asked in a thoughtful voice. "I was expecting there to be some skill barrier, like applying a complicated procedure with little margin of error."

"Great skill is required to actually forge something worthwhile, as heated adamantine is rather sticky," he answered obligingly. "Anyone less than a master smith would just waste-"

The room jolted, making the frozen dwarf sway. The emerald-studded sarcophagus in the corner jumped, its lid raising a finger's breadth before slamming shut again.

"What was that?" she asked, startled. "Are your men moving the room?"

"No, they won't do anything to it until they have quite thoroughly verified that you are dead," he replied as he looked around. "This must be your minions trying something stupid and futile."

She placed her ear against the wall. Only the youma and Jadeite would be able to teleport near here. "Hello? Can you hear me?" she

shouted, worried for their safety. Tiger in particular might have followed her despite the danger.

Faint rumbling reached her, and occasionally masonry cracked or rock groaned. No voices at all, even when the room shuddered again. It didn't sound as if any living being was nearby.

"It sounds a little like a very slow cave-in," she reported to the Duke. "Was there perhaps a plan to bury this trap after it had gone off?"

He shook his head. "Why? That would be pointless. We don't get any earthquakes here either."

She considered more possibilities until she remembered something important. "Actually, what is happening to all the mana that can't reach me?" she asked in a shaky voice.

The Duke looked surprised at her tone. "It hits the adamantine and gets stuck outside, obviously."

"That's what I was afraid of," she answered. "Did you consider how dangerous that is?" When Snyder had first made wards to stop her sailor uniform from appearing on her underlings, the blocked magic had stuck around her dungeon heart and produced chaotic results.

He didn't share her apprehension. "Nothing to worry about. It's merely more power for the city's infrastructure, which will consume it just like the mana rising from below."

"That's even worse!" she blurted out.

"What, contributing something beneficial to society during your last moments?" he said, winking.

She wasn't in a mood for jokes. "Flooding your city with mana that's tainted by a dungeon heart, mixed with dark magic from my patron deity, and containing all the Corruption that can't reach me in here!" she elaborated.

He scoffed. "A drop in the ocean, you mean. With all the power we harvest from below, yours will be so diluted by the point it hits the wards that nobody will notice anything. It's not an issue."

"I- I don't think you realise how much mana I can draw upon," she answered. She wasn't boasting, but saying that still felt awkward.

"Your attempts at unsettling me are pointless. I can't help you get out, so you can stop pretending to be concerned for my citizens," he said. "Unless you are simply trying to make me miserable?"

"No! But you can't deny that something strange is happening outside!"

As if on cue, the room shook again.

"I still believe that it is merely a doomed rescue attempt," the Duke said, rolling his eyes.

"And I have yet another reason to break out of here fast," she replied. Her fingers danced over the keyboard, bringing up arcane diagrams. She would draw one of those right now so it could collect and concentrate ambient mana while she worked. She wouldn't get out without being able to cast spells.

Last edited: Jun 2, 2017

Trapped (first half)

Sparks flew from the red-hot iron as the hammer struck it repeatedly, some of them travelling far enough to strike the smith's leather apron. The muscular, copper-skinned dwarf paused suddenly and raised his head. With a frown, he rested his hammer on the anvil and pulled down the face-wrap that kept his long, bushy beard out of the way. "Hey Rom, are you hearing that too?"

Across the smithy, right next to a rack full of almost-finished swords, a dwarf so young his beard was barely more than a brown fuzz looked up from his work. The apprentice lifted the knife he was sharpening off the pedal-driven whetstone in front of him. Without the grinding noise, the smithy was much quieter, and he turned his head left and right as he listened. "Some kind of sizzling, yes?" he asked after a moment. He looked down, at the worn stone floor covered in filings. "Below?"

"It's coming from the pumps," his master said, his expression darkening.

"Oh," Rom said in a small voice. The sweat that formed on his brow had nothing to do with the heat in the room. He knew there were pipes that conducted pressurized magma passing below.

"It sounds almost like a boiling kettle," the master smith continued, still frowning. He walked out the open front door, gesturing at his apprentice to follow. "Come, give me a hand here!"

Rom obediently hurried after him. Outside, he found the old dwarf pulling at the ring attached to an iron hatch in the front yard's floor.

With combined efforts, they managed to pull it open. Warm, humid air blew into their faces from the square maintenance shaft.

"Not good. Everything should be dry down there," the smith growled over the now clearly audible sizzling and dripping noises. "Those weird tremors from earlier must have caused a leak somewhere." He crouched and reached for the ladder.

"Wait!" Rom called out. "I'll go! I learned a spell to protect myself from the heat from my previous master," he said.

"Are you sure?" the older dwarf asked, a hint of worry in his bronze eyes as he looked at his apprentice.

"Yes, it's going to be safer for me than for you," Rom said. "If there is boiling steam down there, I'll merely get wet while you, well…"

The smith stared at him for a moment before he nodded cleared the way. "If you insist. Don't try to fix anything, just find the problem and report it to me. And be careful!"

"Of course, boss." The metal of the ladder felt warm under Rom's hands as he descended into the narrow shaft. He never liked working in the maintenance tunnels, since they were tight and the air down there smelled stale, but he liked the idea of an explosion beneath the smithy even less.

"I'm at the bottom now!" he shouted as soon as his feet touched solid ground on a four-way intersection. "The noise seems to be coming from tunnel three," he added after a quick look at the painted signs.

"Understood. Don't take any risks," came the answer from above.

Rom walked towards the source of the sizzling and dripping noises, ducking his head to avoid bumping against the tunnel's low ceiling.

Thin clouds of steam wafted through the upper part of the corridor, slowly drifting his way. His imagination saw twisted, ghostly shapes wherever they glowed under the dim lights of the magical lanterns. Reassuringly, they condensed into mere water that dripped down on him wherever they brushed past cooler stone.

Rom wiped the liquid off his brow. With his protection spell, the hot drizzle was more refreshing than annoying, and it cleared his thoughts. The old geezer above would already have been forced to stop at this point.

Rock vibrated under his feet as he got closer to the pumps, and the steaming puddles rippled constantly. Where was all the water even

coming from? To his senses, the surrounding stone felt solid and unbroken. Nevertheless, the source of the hissing noise was in front of him. Great gouts of steam and liquid were shooting from a small crack in the wall.

He sucked in a sharp breath as he realised it wasn't a gash at all. The water was appearing out of thin air, boiling into existence around one of the wards against evil on the local mana conduit. The complicated symbol had to be extremely hot if the liquid was turning into steam upon contact.

He stared at the masterfully shaped medallion, tracing its clean and precise lines with his gaze. It was the ugliest thing he had ever seen in his life. With a snarl, he raised the pincer-shaped claw at the end of his right arm, eager to smash the offending ward to bits.

Above the rune-inscribed terraces of the casting chamber, the air crackled and popped as it oscillated between various shades of blue and violet. Robed wizards stood in small groups between meandering inscriptions and freestanding pillars, frowning up at the protective dome and wrinkling their foreheads. Near the outer walls, dwarven soldiers shuffled their feet as they watched the magicians, occasionally glancing at their officers as if wishing for orders.

On one of the cut-off pillars towering above the magical diagrams, Mengolin's expression grew darker with every breath. "It's still weakening! Hurry up with that node!" Raising a hand that glittered with jewel-encrusted rings, he pointed at a circle of wizards holding hands.

They were activating one of the chamber's still functional power nodes, coaxing mana from the intricate crystal patterns with their chanting. Light poured from the designs on the ground, growing in intensity until the spellcasting dwarfs were only visible as dark silhouettes surrounding the glow.

"You reported that the Dark Empress was gone!" the accusing voice of Countess Zasod came from the crystal ball on the marble pedestal in front of him.

"Well excuse me for assuming that his Grace's plan worked when she disappeared from all magical forms of tracking!" the court wizard snapped in irritation. He currently had little time to spare for the last remaining noble above the rank of baron, who was technically in command of the city.

"Stop! You are making things worse!" a female voice shouted from somewhere close, interrupting the Countess' reply.

Zasod's brow furrowed in disapproval as she spotted Ambassador Camilla in her so-called uniform that was too revealing to be decent. The blonde fairy was hovering in the air a few metres past the railing, her beating wings humming loudly.

"Explain, quickly!" Mengolin ordered. If Camilla had flown up here to interrupt them, she likely hadn't done so on idle speculation alone.

"Melissa down there-" she tilted her head towards her sisters, whose tall, slender silhouettes were unmistakable among the sturdier dwarfs, "says that the dome is fading faster every time you activate another of those mana nodes!"

The countess and the court wizard exchanged a look of horrified comprehension.

"Contaminated mana supply!" Mengolin blurted out.

"The attack is in the mana!" Zasod said at the same time.

The court wizard raised both hands over his head, his flowing robe fluttering from the rapid motion. He waved his fingers, and an attention-grabbing red flash lit up every corner of the chamber.

Heads turned in his direction, some of them squinting from the glare.

"Close the nodes! Do it now!" Mengolin shouted, amplifying his voice to thunderous levels.

Camilla winced and covered her ringing ears. She lost a metre of altitude before she recovered from the noise, and even then, a faint vibration in her bones remained. The resonance didn't fade. It grew unpleasantly in strength, making her bile rise, and she realised that

it was already too late.

The centre of the dome broke with a sound like shattering glass. The jagged hole rapidly increased in size, its edges fragmenting into fading splinters as it sped outwards in an expanding circle.

At the same moment, the eight columns of green light stabbing towards the ceiling lost their colour. Clear pillars of icy water loomed in their place, standing still for a single moment before succumbing to gravity.

The wizards around the nodes shrieked and shielded their faces as the freezing water crashed down on them. Within moments, the pressure hammered all of them to the ground, and the roaring flow swept them along as it cascaded onto the lower platforms.

Mengolin gaped as a partially submerged sleeve turned a sickly yellow and its buttons expanded into a field of metallic scales. He could no longer tell where the garment ended and its wearer's skin began.

More of the drenched wizards changed, partially concealed by clouds of flying droplets and mist. Limbs bent at unnatural angles and silhouettes stretched and distorted into shapes that were only approximately dwarf-like.

"Monsters! They are turning into monsters!" one of the soldiers gasped.

By now, everyone had started shouting, pointing, and fleeing from the onrushing water. The few unassigned wizards were running about, trying to reach higher ground or casting protective spells.

The fairies were flying above the flood and shooting pink blasts from their palms. Where they struck, the ground buckled and turned into tooth-shaped spikes.

From his elevated position, Mengolin could see that they were trying to raise a semi-circular dam around the resting wounded.

A slimy arm shot towards the flying girls like a frog's tongue, growing thinner as it elongated. With a wet slap, three boneless fingers

wrapped all the way around a slender calf.

The surprised fairy managed half of a startled shriek before the arm contracted and yanked her down, driving the breath from her lungs. Water fountained high into the air as she splashed down in front of the monster.

"Mengolin! Mengolin, answer me!" Countess Zasod demanded. She was hard to understand with all the frightened shouting, splashing, and clanging that echoed through the room.

He grabbed the crystal ball and ducked behind the pedestal, unwilling to wrest all of his attention away from the chaos below. Here was an opportunity to do something useful. "Yes, my Lady?"

"Report! The wards are going crazy all over the place, and I need to know what's going on!"

That, at least, was a question he could easily answer. "The casting chamber is no longer consuming most of the contaminated mana, so now it can reach the entire city. Also, it turns people into monsters."

Something big and hairy hopped past his platform and dropped back out of sight. There was a thumping noise, and a wizard's chanting turned into frightened screams.

"What?" the countess shouted. "Did Keeper Mercury open a breach into the Hell Below?"

"Sadly, I can't entirely exclude the possibility," he answered after a moment of thought. It would explain where all the evil energy was coming from. "She couldn't have dug into it, but she might have opened a portal. However, our wards should have stopped the corrupted magic from spreading much farther."

"The same wards she crushed on her way down?"

That was a point he hadn't considered. The realization felt like ice water running down his back, and for a moment, he feared he had been splashed. "My Lady, you must get yourself to safety while it's still possible! Try to reach a temple, or better yet, leave the city!"

"What if the priests protected an expedition to shut down the portal instead?" she asked, moving while she talked. There was a strange patch of ice growing on a flower pot, which she gave a wide berth.

A pair of clawed green hands reached for the edge of Mengolin's platform.

"I would advise-" the court wizard paused to shoot a bolt of lighting at the grasping limbs. When the climber let go, he continued "-smashing her dungeon heart instead. If there really is a portal, she needs to power it somehow."

"I'll consider your suggestion," the Countess said. "May the Light keep you safe!"

The crystal ball went dark.

That was a tall order, Mengolin concluded as he took stock of his situation.

Monsters were everywhere, stirring up the ankle-deep water as they moved towards the two dozen or so dwarfs who had climbed onto the higher platforms. Claws and multi-coloured blasts of magic rattled their shield wall, and it was only the air support from the three yelling, crying fairies that kept the swarming attackers at bay.

Well, if he wanted to make it out of here, he had his work cut out for him.

Ominous shadows crept over the bookshelves and the ornate desk in Torian's office as his floating candles moved in predetermined patterns. Droplets of red wax rained down like blood, turning into fading mist before they could stain the crimson carpet. In the flickering candlelight, it almost looked as if the gargoyle statues climbing the towering backrest of his chair were moving.

Torian himself sat behind the massive desk, the lower half of his face eclipsed by the glowing crystal ball in front of him. As the impressive centrepiece of the room, he exuded an aura of power, wisdom, and danger appropriate to his position. At least he liked to

think so, because he had spent more time getting his office just right than he was willing to admit.

To his mild annoyance, the Corruption had gotten to his gargoyles, and now they were too cute and curvy to be properly intimidating. To his much greater annoyance, the carefully crafted arrangement was completely wasted on visitors who insisted on rudely standing behind him and looking over his shoulders.

Cathy leaned in closer, resting her weight on the left armrest of his chair and denting the wood with her armoured gauntlet. "How does staring at that," she scowled at the scene in the crystal ball, "help us figure out what's going on?"

At first glance, it appeared as if the orb was displaying the sun. A small hill of ice glowed so brightly that the box-like building it had buried remained a dark and indistinct silhouette. An aquamarine tornado of energy swirled around its slopes, reaching up to the cave's ceiling and whipping debris across its walls. Jagged, crack-like inclusions of pure darkness spread outwards from the ice, pulsing and growing larger as they melded with the maelstrom.

He wished she would just let him think in peace if she had nothing of value to contribute. "You have, of course, a better suggestion than watching the place we saw her last?" he asked, not bothering to hide his annoyance.

"Send someone over there to find her!" the swordswoman demanded.

"Completely pointless," he answered immediately. "Even if we could safely teleport someone over there, they wouldn't be able to do any better than directly scrying on her or using her dungeon as a link to locate her." Both of those methods had failed, which raised some disturbing questions. They were almost infallible short of divine intervention, as far as he knew.

"We are pretty sure she's inside that building," Cathy said, tapping the crystal ball where it showed the ice-covered boxy shape. "We could try talking to her through the walls!"

"Provided we could somehow survive the raging torrent of magical energy around it," he pointed out the huge, glaring flaw in her otherwise valid idea. "Besides, I'm becoming more and more convinced that everything is going exactly according to her plan."

"Excuse me, but you will have to explain that one to me," Snyder's voice said from somewhere to the right of his desk. The redheaded acolyte was kneeling on the ground, pulling up the eyelid of a prone imp and waving a shining finger left and right in front of her huge black eyeball.

The imp's chest was rising and falling slowly, but her eye didn't show as much as a single twitch in reaction to the light.

"I fail to see how a complete loss of communications, comatose imps and inert traps – all without a single hint of warning and while we are besieged by a hostile army – could be part of some grand master plan," Snyder elaborated.

"Indeed," Jadeite agreed. He stood to Torian's left; arms crossed over his open jacket, and was looking at the warlock with a hint of curiosity.

If there was anything satisfying about this situation, it was the fact the rest of the inner circle had been kept in the dark too. "Operational security," he stated. "The Empress wanted to avoid even the possibility of there being a leak. Perhaps her plan leaves her vulnerable, which is why she is concealing her location."

Cathy and Jadeite exchanged a silent look, and the former shook her head.

"What plan?" the swordswoman asked. "What do you think she's doing?"

Even if Mercury was keeping those two around for their power, rather than their brains, they should have been able to figure that out on their own. "Let's see. There's a huge whirlpool of evil magic below the city. Corrupted water appears everywhere and turns its denizens into monsters who bear a certain resemblance to the likes of Lishika, Mareki, or Umbra. Why, it almost looks as if chasing

down the Duke was a convenient misdirection that let her reach a location from where she could easily corrupt the whole city!"

Cathy returned Torian's smug smile with an expression as if she had just sucked on a lemon and then covered her eyes with her hand. "That's what everybody is going to assume, isn't it?" she asked.

"Well, it is rather obvious in hindsight," Torian replied.

"Nevertheless, she can't be doing this on purpose," Jadeite contradicted, his eyes reflecting the pale, bluish glare in the crystal ball. "It's just too much power for her to control. Even my body couldn't withstand channelling that much dark power for so long."

Torian glanced up at the curly-haired man, raising an eyebrow. "Excuse me? Are you seriously suggesting that something is beyond her Majesty's capabilities just because *you* can't do it?"

"Yes. There's no vast difference between her power and my own as long as she isn't drawing on her treasury," the dark general stated confidently.

Preposterous. Torian didn't scoff at the boast, but only because he didn't dare anger Jadeite. To think that he considered himself a near equal of the Dark Empress! Then again, he had pulled off magical effects on a fairly absurd scale…

"You think this is some kind of convenient accident?" the chief warlock drawled, waving his palm at the crystal ball.

"It's not convenient at all!" Cathy snapped. "We don't even know for sure if she's all right!"

A roughly human-shaped rock mushroomed upwards from the carpet, right in front of Torian's desk. It cracked and crumbled, revealing the muscular form of Mercury's sister underneath the stone shell.

"No change with the dungeon heart," Tiger reported. "It's still stuck mid-beat, growing neither brighter nor dimmer. No luck searching for," her eyes briefly flicked towards Torian, "secret identity, either."

"Well, there you have it," the chief warlock said. "Dungeon heart still active, imps still alive, and we aren't being attacked by angry ghosts either. She's fine."

"Doesn't mean she's not in trouble," Cathy muttered. "And don't remind me of the ghosts. By the way," she leaned forward over Torian's desk, steadying herself on its delicate surface with her gauntleted hands, and shouted towards the door "have you guys found out where the wraith-thing with the chains disappeared to yet?"

Her call echoed in the hallway outside for a moment before hasty footsteps approached.

A thin warlock with a gaunt face skidded to a halt in front of the doorway and grabbed onto its wood as his feet slipped on the smooth tiles. His shoes and legs, as well as half of his short tunic were splattered with thick, transparent slime.

Torian recognised the disgusting gunk. The huge eyeballs that Empress Mercury had repurposed for ward-breaking duty weren't dealing well with their increased power supply. Some were popping at random, which made the scrying chamber a place to avoid if you could. One of the reasons why everybody important had gathered in his office.

"It's hiding in a dark place, Commander," the warlock reported, saluting. The motion transferred some of the slime from his hand to his forehead, and he grimaced.

"Hey, you got here surprisingly fast," Tiger praised him. She was sitting on the edge of Torian's desk, something he grudgingly tolerated because he liked not being on fire.

"Thank you, Princess, but I was already on my way," the warlock said, bowing. "Bad news, I'm afraid. The besieging force is preparing for an attack."

"Damn it!" Cathy exclaimed, reaching for her helmet. "They know our defences are weakened. How many of them are moving?" she asked while striding towards the door.

"All of them, Commander. Roughly three thousand dwarfs," he reported.

"That's twice as many as last time," Snyder whispered, his face pale. "They are holding nothing back, and with the dungeon heart gone into cardiac arrest…"

"We will have no choice but to deal with them more forcefully," Jadeite said in a cold tone of voice.

"What a pity," Torian said, his sarcasm concealing his worry. Fending off that many of the burrowing, hairy nuisances without Keeper support or traps would be difficult, at the very least.

"Mercury isn't going to like that," Cathy disagreed, the corners of her lips moving downward.

"Do you have a better idea?" Jadeite challenged.

"I have one that might just work!" Tiger said as she slid off the desk and started bouncing on her tiptoes. "Cathy, fetch me your most useless goblin! No, better make it three instead! I'll be right back!"

The orange and black youma disappeared under a shell of dull stone, which crumbled to dust as she teleported away.

Last edited: Sep 2, 2017

Trapped (second half)

The city gates of Salthalls stood wide open, and streams of dwarfs spilled out into the surrounding countryside while alarm bells rang ceaselessly. None of the sweat-drenched, red-faced and panting citizens had energy to spare to look at the sky, and so they didn't spot the figure floating high above them.

Tiger would have expected fleeing to involve more running, but the crowds below her were made up of people who were simply too exhausted to move quickly. Instead, they were walking at a brisk pace, keeping an eye on their surroundings and avoiding anything that looked wet. It was a good thing she had no intention to use the clogged-up streets. Now where was that well Mercury had used to enter the city?

She quickly located the circular shaft and teleported inside, staying hidden from the dwarfs. The calm water below her reflected her orange-skinned form as she took a small crystal ball from her backpack. Right, the chambers her adopted sister had broken into were that way.

She wasn't going to teleport as she couldn't be certain the dwarfs hadn't replaced the wards Mercury had broken on her way in. She wasn't going to dig either. Her earth-flavoured magic allowed her to part soil and rock alike. It was like pulling aside a curtain and closing it behind her, creating a small bubble that moved through the underground unimpeded.

Water spurted into her moving bubble of space, splashing her in the face.

She spluttered in surprise and held her breath on reflex. Oh, yes, there had been an aquifer in the way. Hurrying up, she managed to pass through before the liquid reached higher than her hips. What a great start.

Finally, worked stone replaced the rock below her, and a ceiling peeled open under her. The water she brought along immediately

dropped to the ground with a loud splash.

So much for a stealthy entrance. Hopefully, with all the running noises and shouts coming from all around, nobody had heard her. She quickly checked her surroundings.

Flickering lights, a little dim from the hoar frost that covered them, illuminated a stone chamber with stacks of wooden crates. One open door led to an empty corridor where a strangely static cloud of mist hovered above a sculpted sink. The other door opened to a large hallway, where a large humanoid frog was staring at her from behind one of the decorative pillars.

She jumped in surprise and raised her hands, ready to summon a spell.

The creature's huge yellow eyes blinked once. It watched her for a few seconds and then walked away, its feet making slapping noises as it shambled deeper down the tunnel.

All right. No need to defend herself. She was just going to start her search, then. Down the other passage.

She had been sneaking around for several minutes when Cathy's voice intruded in her head. *"Tiger, are you in Salthalls? What are you doing?"*

"Looking for a big pool of evil water," she summarised her plan.

"What? You'll mutate if you touch it!" Cathy's mental voice shouted.

"Nah, this definitely feels like home. Metallia-flavoured dark power," she reassured her as she peeked around a statue. *"Besides, I'll be careful."*

"You just stepped into a puddle," Cathy replied, sounding half horrified and half exasperated.

She looked down. Water rippled around her feet. Another drop dripped from the icicle on the ceiling as she inspected her foot. *"So I did. See? It's not doing anything to me. In fact..."*

She squatted down and dipped her finger into the cool liquid.

"What are you doing? Stop! Don't!"

Ignoring the swordswoman, she licked her finger clean. *"Yep. As I thought, it's just food to me."*

"Are you crazy? Don't take unnecessary risks like that!" Cathy paused. *"You aren't planning to use that stuff on my goblins, are you?"*

Tiger tiptoed onwards, passing a few stairs down. There was a hostile pressure in the air. Had she ended up somewhere where the wards were still working? *"Stop distracting me, I may be in a bit of trouble-"*

"Stop!" A low, commanding voice said behind her.

"Gah!" Startled, she whirled around.

A short figure wearing so many layers of rain clothing that it was almost impossible to tell what it looked like underneath was threatening her with a mace. It also had a spear strapped to its back.

"You one of the sane ones?" the probably-dwarf asked in a gruff voice, keeping his weapon ready to strike.

"Yes? I mean, I'm not going to attack you if you don't attack me first," Tiger answered tentatively, wondering how he had managed to get behind her in the first place.

"Fair enough. Think you can distract the bunch of crazies camped outside while I sneak a group of people past?"

"Huh?" she replied eloquently. She finally spotted the secret door in the wall behind the dwarf. It looked just like the masonry and stood open a few centimetres. Several pairs of eyes were watching her through the narrow gap.

While she wasn't looking, the dwarf had somehow gotten his hands on her shoulder and was now pushing her in the direction of a doorway. "Don't worry, they don't go after their own!"

"Watch out, there's a whole bunch of monsters on the plaza beyond that door!" Cathy pointed out, not very helpfully in Tiger's opinion.

She sighed. Easier to go along with the flow than to cause a loud disturbance. "Fine, but at least give me directions to the nearest wine cellar."

The dwarf chuckled. "Hah, you are still sane all right. Fine, just keep the monsters' attention for a while!"

She stumbled through a wide, arched doorway, and many inhuman heads turned to face her.

Behind a stall that sold jewellery, a bearded creature with huge bat-like ears screeched, drawing the attention of the monsters that hadn't spotted her yet. More mutants appeared from various shops, and an entire group of creatures sitting on the stairs around a semi-frozen fountain turned in unison, like a school of fish.

She surveyed the marketplace and its occupants. It wouldn't have looked out of place in the Dark Kingdom, actually. This, she knew how to handle. She stood tall and proud, clenching her fists as she flared the dark power coursing through her.

The closest creatures took a step back, while those farther away ducked their heads and looked down. Some at the very back of the room discretely shuffled towards the exit.

With a grin, she swept her gaze over the beings who tried to make themselves appear smaller. "Good, you guys can sense who's in charge! I need some stuff carried, and guess who's going to do the hard work?"

Lines of dwarven soldiers advanced quickly through the streaming rain, crossing the surface terrain far faster than they could have dug their way into the dungeon. With the enemy Keeper unable to strike at them with her magic, they could simply walk over the outer defensive tunnels and preserve their strength.

Or at least they thought so until an absolutely enormous lightning

bolt dropped from the sky and struck the mountain's flank.

The advance faltered as the armoured figures blinked, momentarily blinded by the flash, and squinted at the spot where it had struck.

A transparent, bubble-shaped dome covered the surprisingly undamaged impact point, protecting the two figures and the wine barrel within.

Tiger looked down the slope at the rows of unsettled dwarfs and couldn't help but admire Jadeite's skill with illusions. That lightning bolt had certainly captured everyone's attention and focused it on her.

A sparkling bolt of pinkish light rose from the back of the enemy formation, tumbled through the air, and hit the shield with no more effect than the raindrops.

She hoped his protection spells were just as good as his illusions and didn't visibly react.

In contrast, the absolutely rotund goblin at her side whimpered in fright and dropped to his knees. The green monster was so fat that he was almost round. Due to his weight, she couldn't teleport him, the barrel, and another goblin, as she had originally planned. Still, roughly dwarf-shaped as he was, he would suffice for her demonstration.

"Greetings, dwarfs!" she shouted, spreading her arms and throwing her cloak wide open. Better to get this done and over with before someone decided to rush her position.

Below, helmeted heads jerked and looked around in surprise. The vampires in the scavenging room were successfully transmitting her words directly to the enemies' brains, then.

"I can't help wonder if you really thought this attack through," she continued. "By now, you must have learned of what's happening at Salthalls!"

An angry roar from many throats answered her.

"Excellent. Now, you should be asking yourselves whether or not the Dark Empress can do at her seat of power what she can do in a distant dwarven city."

Pausing for dramatic effect, she raised a ladle and held it up for several seconds.

"The answer is 'yes', obviously!" She dipped the ladle into the open barrel that had once held wine, but now held water from one of Salthalls' deeper channels. With an over-exaggerated swing, she splashed the fat goblin with the ladle's contents.

Horrified gasps came from her audience as the green creature started growing until it was taller than Tiger. The large, triangular ears had turned into real horns, and an armoured shell covered the formerly flabby skin.

Satisfied with the effect, the black-striped youma continued. "Oh, but, I can already tell what you are thinking. It's a bluff. A trick. An illusion. She merely cast a spell on that goblin. She doesn't have enough water to get all of you. To all of that, I have a simple answer: Observe!"

Her index finger pointed upwards, towards the mountain's peak. Up in the sky, beyond even the crenelations of the looming black tower, flew three of Mercury's airships.

Wind howled through the circular hole in the bottom of the airships' gondola, tearing at the robes of the chanting warlocks. The three mages stood in a triangular formation around the gaping opening, leaning on staves affixed just as tightly to the floor as their boots.

Flames and arcane symbols moved in counter-rotating circles around the hole as their chanting intensified, reaching the final stages of the summoning ritual.

As always when the spell was used on a submerged target, it didn't just summon the intended person. Lishika appeared in the centre of the open hole, just above where the floor would have been. Around

her was a cylinder of water that almost reached the cabin's ceiling.

It kept its shape for an instant even as it started dropping through the hole in the floor.

The slender, long-tailed youma immersed in the column of water immediately reacted when she felt herself starting to fall. She disappeared with a flash of lightning, and the many cubic metres of contaminated water continued descending without her.

Umbra and Mareki made their own escapes from their respective pillars of water, which plummeted from the other two airships.

The many tons of liquid only partially dispersed as they dropped several hundred meters. Their impact still shook the ground and caused minor avalanches. A copse of young trees near an impact point was completely uprooted, and denser vegetation had its leaves ripped away. None of the water had been aimed directly at the dwarfs, but the spray drifting in the air and the water running down the mountain still threatened to get them if they continued on their current course.

A wolf-sized blur darted out of the dripping underbrush and raced up a tree. Blue fur glistened wetly on spider-like legs as the creature ascended the trunk in defiance of gravity and disappeared among the branches. The bark moved where it had been touched, shivering and shuddering like jelly.

Count Ornish shuddered too and put down his telescope. That little monster might have been a rabbit before the water had gotten to it, if the long ears were any indication. Stone-faced, he turned to the other dwarfs in the room. "It's not a bluff."

"I could feel the impact even here," his court wizard said, his skin the colour of chalk. "So much water. My Lord, it's going to seep underground. The sappers-"

Ornish raised both hands. "I know. I know!" There was a metallic grinding noise, and it took him a moment to realise that it was

coming from his clenching armoured fist. "We cannot win this," he concluded.

"But, my Lord!" Baron Sodnil protested. "Can't we work around this? What if the priests make us protective talismans? Countess Zasod reports that the victims can regain their minds, if not their true shapes! Salthalls needs our help!"

The count looked at him with regret. His old friend hadn't been the same since his daughter had been captured by the Keeper. "Sodnil, the effects on our own troops are a secondary concern. There are eight thousand captive civilians in her dungeon. If we press on, we will be outnumbered nearly three to one."

The dwarven commanders looked at each other with grim expressions. They all knew what a numbers disadvantage meant when attacking an entrenched enemy.

"Signal the retreat," Count Ornish ordered, his mouth tasting like ashes. "Inform Countess Zasod that she is on her own."

Ami's light spells had faded away over an hour ago, and the inside of the adamantine prison was dark. She was sitting on its floor, her pale face illuminated only by the shine of her computer's display as she stared at the lines scrolling past.

Finally, the dance of her fingers over the keyboard stopped, and she leaned back and rolled her shoulders. Her neck felt stiff from sitting still for so long, and she let out a long sigh.

"Are you finding the wards not to your liking?" Duke Libasheshtan taunted her from the corner she had pushed him into so she had more space to work.

As she swivelled her torso to face him, some of her screen's brightness washed over the uncovered adamantine. The arcane patterns engraved into the bluish metal glittered like a sky full of stars as the light hit them.

"They seem flawless, as far as I can tell," she admitted in a resigned voice, secretly impressed by their design. They did some clever things to spatial dimensions to hide everything beyond the room from magical means of travel. Her Mercury computer could even provide mathematical proof that leaving required passing through the volume of space currently occupied by the adamantine walls.

"I told you the Light gods are unsurpassed when it comes to defences," the Duke said smugly.

His attempts to needle her made her feel a little less guilty about keeping him stuck in the ice block. She cringed when she tried to imagine what standing still for so long felt like.

"Are you ready to give up yet? Might as well kill yourself now if you are really worried about your magic making a mess outside," he said. The melt water collecting underneath him indicated that he wouldn't stay immobilized for much longer.

She rose to her feet, feeling a prickling sensation as blood rushed back into her legs. "I'll have a go at the adamantine first," she informed him.

"Hah! This will be entertaining. For me," he said. "I'm looking forward to finding out what happens to a Keeper who tries to use holy magic."

Turning away from him, she refused to let his words intimidate her. On the ground, she could dimly make out the pattern she had scratched with the aid of the mace she had picked up. Careful not to disturb the lines, she stepped into one of the loops of the mana-gathering diagram and faced the wall.

Mana that had collected over time within the bounds of the concentric circles flooded into her body. It felt like a pittance compared to what she was used to working with, but it should suffice for two spells.

She broke into a cold sweat as she mentally reviewed the necessary formulas and motions. Shaping a spell from scratch, without the assistance of a dungeon heart, required precise motions and

flawless concentration. She had exhaustive theoretical knowledge of what she needed to do, but lacked experience and enough mana to try again if she made a mistake.

Goblins and imps could manage spellcasting, she reminded herself. It couldn't be too difficult. Besides, she had carefully selected the simplest spells that would still work for her purposes. After a long, calming breath, she opened her eyes and drew the mana to her hands with determination.

The act of forming a spell required enough of her concentration that she had no more time for self-doubt. Her fingertips traced glowing arcs in the air as she hurried to stabilise the structures defined by the words she was chanting. Without her dungeon heart taking care of details like that, everything felt far more difficult and unstable.

Nevertheless, she managed to finish the spell and pointed with her arms straight at the adamantine wall. She aimed at the central rune of the prison's warding scheme, almost touching it with her index and middle finger, and released the magic.

A lance of brilliant white shot from the extended digits, and with a flash, searing heat radiated from the impact point.

Yelping, she jerked her hand back and shook it to cool her burnt fingertips. She should have kept more distance instead of worrying about missing her target!

Duke Libasheshtan was guffawing. "A classic case of much pain, no gain!"

Blinking, she waited for her vision to recover from the brief flare. "I wouldn't say that," she disagreed.

A red spot no larger than a fingernail glowed on the wall like a baleful eye.

"You have hurt yourself completing the first step of a process you can't finish. Congratulations. How's that holy magic coming along, by the way?"

"I have an idea that might work," she answered in a quiet voice. She

had no way to get true holy power with which to revitalise the adamantine, but she hoped she could substitute life energy.

Its properties were close to holy power to begin with, and it had additional traits that made her optimistic. Injured dark gods could use it to heal, and it enabled her to use her magic when her body was drifting in the dark realm in a state of pseudo-death. There was a good chance it could do the same for a piece of not-quite-dead remnant of a divine being.

As for getting some life energy, well, she could drain some from the Duke. She glanced over at him and then dismissed the idea. The adamantine would certainly reject energy stolen from an unwilling victim. She would have to use her own.

She placed her uninjured hand on her collarbone and used her remaining mana to cast a life-draining spell. Her legs grew weak as she carefully drew a thread of softly glowing white light out of herself, and a wave of tiredness washed through her.

She stumbled and leaned against the wall to remain standing, feeling as if she had just worked herself to exhaustion.

"Wait. What did you just do?" Duke Libasheshtan asked, craning his neck sideways as far as he could in order to see the small light hovering over her palm better.

She felt too woozy to answer him, so she focused on catching her breath and not falling over as she directed a tendril of energy at the red-hot spot.

The heated metal sucked in the offered life energy greedily, devouring her small ball of light within seconds.

"You can't generate holy power, that's just impossible! Unless-" The Duke's wide-eyed expression briefly turned thoughtful before settling on exasperated disbelief. "Why would you carry a container full of holy power on your person? What could a Keeper possible need it for?" His gaze briefly focused on her outfit. "And where did you even-"

His voice had grown a little higher-pitched, and she got the impression he would have thrown up his arms in frustration if the ice had let him.

"No. Don't answer any of that. Please. I still value my sanity." He was shaking his head, black beard whipping left and right. "I'll just be over here and take comfort in the fact that you can't cheat at the last part, no matter how well prepared."

Too tired to shoot him even a half-hearted glare, she proceeded with the next step of the procedure. Blood and judgement. She didn't want to touch the spot of searing hot metal, but if she let a drop of blood run down the wall then it should get there easily enough.

Clenching her teeth and bracing herself for pain, she placed her burnt fingertips onto one of the sharper-angled engraved wards. With a quick sideways jerk, she ripped open the singed skin.

It didn't hurt as much as she had expected. A droplet of blood seeped from her index finger and left a dark trail as it trickled down the wall.

She followed it with her eyes, taking note of the faint bluish shimmer it left in its wake. Was the adamantine already active and judging her? She should pass, if the Duke's information was correct. Her intentions were good, and she had always tried to do the right thing.

But would the adamantine see it the same way? She had become a Keeper to save her own life – admittedly without understanding the ramifications at the time. Likewise, she had started worshipping Metallia out of fear of what could happen if she didn't.

Would the adamantine be able to tell that she had done so on the advice of the Light, or would it only see that she had benefited from her association with a dark god? Worse, Metallia had rewarded her for services rendered.

She didn't know if the divine material considered circumstances. Could it even look at the past? If it could only evaluate her current state... Hope blossomed for a moment before she concluded that yes, it could at least look at everything she had done. It wouldn't be

able to figure out her intentions without accessing her mind, and that meant it could read her memories too.

It would see every occasion when she had suppressed her conscience out of pragmatism.

Cold sweat appeared on her brow as she worried about what it would think of her more questionable compromises. Such as carefully staying ignorant of her employees' past crimes and atrocities because she needed the manpower. Still using imps as expendable slave labour and golem parts when she could no longer be entirely sure that this version stayed non-sapient. Injuring, scaring and imprisoning people who were in her way.

Her throat went dry, and she gulped. There were also many other, lesser reasons for feeling guilty. Hiding the truth about being Sailor Mercury from her mother, for example. Not dedicating time to protecting her civilians from the effects of her dungeon's Corruption. Accidentally ruining Cathy's, Jered's, Snyder's and Camilla's careers.

None of those, however, even compared to her greatest regret. Good people had died unnecessarily while attacking her dungeon. She could have prevented the deaths of those poor dwarfs. Fighting had not been her only option. She could have surrendered and taken the Light's standing offer of sanctuary and imprisonment.

She dropped to her knees, hanging her head. In despair, she clenched her fists so hard that more blood spilled from her fingertips.

Still, she clung to her belief that she had made the right choice. She simply couldn't sacrifice her own freedom while her world was still threatened by Metallia. Her friends needed her. Everything she had learned about the Dark Kingdom suggested that the senshi were completely outmatched, and she needed to find a way back so she could support them.

Glancing at the adamantine, she fervently hoped that it agreed with her reasoning. Otherwise, Earth would fall to Metallia, and this world would follow soon after.

The faint flicker of blue along the blood trail faded out.

"Well, that was quick." the Duke drawled. "You failed, to nobody's surprise," he stated with certainty.

"W-what?" She whipped her head around to stare at him, tears gathering in the corners of her wide-open eyes.

"It's obvious. If you can shrug off being confronted with your evil deeds so easily, then it's clear you aren't capable of feeling guilt and regret like a truly good person."

"W-wait, you mean this happens to everyone?" she asked, blinking rapidly. A little bit of warning about the adamantine making her relive the parts of her life she was least proud of would have been appreciated.

"No. The lack of lamentations, tears, and self-loathing is unusual. Even the most virtuous dwarfs take some time to recover from the experience." He snorted. "Someone with a working conscience who had committed even a fraction of a Keeper's crimes would remain incoherent for weeks."

"I see," she stated softly as her racing heart slowed down somewhat. The guilt had felt horrible – still did – but it wasn't crippling. She also didn't think she had already become a cold-hearted monster. She simply could justify most of her actions to herself, which might have been enough to shield her.

"So," she began after a moment, "is there some visual clue when someone passes the judgement, or did you simply draw conclusions from observing me?"

"The latter," the Duke replied. "Not that the outcome was ever in doubt."

He didn't know for sure! She looked at the ground. With the help of the reddish glow from the heated metal, she quickly located the mace she had placed on the floor near the heated spot.

Metal screeched as she reached for the handle and pulled the weapon closer, dragging its spiky head over the floor.

The Duke winced at the noise and tracked her movements with his eyes. "Now what are you planning to do with that?"

"I'll experimentally verify your conclusion," she explained as she propped the mace's head onto the ground and used its long handle to pull herself to her feet. Leaning against the wall, she managed to lift the weapon despite her protesting muscles. She felt so weak with some of her life energy missing.

He relaxed. "You'll merely be making a fool out of yourself."

"We shall see," she said as she swung the mace.

With a loud clang, it slammed into the adamantine wall and bounced off, almost tearing itself from her grip.

"Not a single scratch!" the Duke laughed. "Told you so!"

She grimaced at the impact point. "I missed!" she protested. "The heated spot is tiny!"

"You are delusional," the dwarf scoffed. "Delusional but entertaining."

She ignored his unhelpful commentary and brought the weapon closer to the red-hot area. If she couldn't aim properly with her current lack of strength, then she would use her body weight to push one of the mace's spikes through the softened metal.

Groaning with the effort, she raised the weapon until she held it horizontally and rested it against the red-hot spot. The strain on her arms lowered when she leaned on the handle, pressing the weapon's head harder against the red-hot spot.

With most of her weight resting on the mace, it suddenly slid to the side and slipped from her fingers.

Off balance, she toppled straight towards the spot of heated metal. She yelped and threw herself to the side, instinctively averting her face from the radiating heat.

Her shoulder bumped against the wall, and the smell of burnt hair

wafted through the room as she slid to the ground.

Behind her, the Duke was laughing so hard that the ice trapping him vibrated from the noise.

Was he right and the adamantine was still invulnerable? Breathing hard, she squinted at its red glow. Her breath hitched.

"Look! LOOK!" she shouted with so much excitement in her voice that the Duke stopped laughing and shot her a puzzled look.

His gaze followed her extended arm and index finger towards the heated adamantine. It took him a moment to notice that she was pointing at a thread of molten metal. Like syrup sticking to the mace, it had stretched out into a thin filament when the weapon fell.

He stared at the dangling string of adamantine, his eyebrows creeping upwards until they disappeared underneath the rim of his helmet and made his bulging eyes appear even wider. His jaw dropped, and a strange noise escaped his throat.

"It worked!" she cheered, her tiredness briefly washed away by a surge of relief. The divine material was allowing her to shape it, even if doing so was difficult.

"It can't be! I- Impossible! You are a Keeper!" the Duke protested. "It cannot- Even I couldn't- How? Why? Worthy? But she's a Keeper! A Keeper! I don't- Never wrong- but, but, but, Keeper!"

While his words devolved into even more incoherent babbling, Ami sat up and recovered her fallen mace, ready to attack the molten adamantine with renewed vigour. It was sticky, so she should be able to scrape bits away until there was a hole.

Using the weapon's long handle, she could reach the molten spot even while seated. In fact, she could preserve her strength by propping it up against her knees and rolling it up and down a little to achieve a drilling effect.

True to her prediction, the sticky adamantine clung to the points of her improvised tool, accumulating in larger and larger globs on the spikes as she scratched at the heated metal.

Her hands suddenly encountered resistance. The mace was stuck, impossible to budge.

Mana flooded into her empty reserves, feeling like ice cubes moving underneath her skin, and she gasped in surprise. Understanding struck her a split-second later. She had made a hole in the prison through which the magic could flood in.

Her eyes shone a bright crimson, making the ward-engraved patch of revealed adamantine in front of her look violet and confirming that she was a Keeper again.

Far away, her dungeon heart sluggishly awakened from slumber. Her awareness was limited to its immediate surroundings, as everything further than a few metres away remained hidden behind a curtain of darkness. Tile by tile, this darkness receded, as if she was rapidly claiming the territory.

The wave of expanding awareness reached the first intersection and rushed down each of the three outgoing tunnels simultaneously. Everything it passed provided information. The state of the walls, the clicking of traps rearming themselves, the amount of water within the pipes within the wall.

Another intersection, and yet another. The rush of knowledge sped up exponentially. The amount of gold and gems in her treasury. The number of withered plants in one of the farms. An imp, rubbing her eyes in confusion. More intersections.

Ami grabbed her head in discomfort as the flashes of knowledge came faster and faster, too quickly for her to process them. They produced a sensation like pins and needles, multiplied by the size of her dungeon.

Running goblins. Armoury. Swords, daggers, clubs. Half-finished reaperbot. Frost patterns. Wandering civilian. Right angles. Aquamarine tiles. Dripping water. Trolls. Beakers. Cables. Mixed patrol. Intruders. Gems. Dragon. Tall ceilings, right angles. Pools and water. Warlocks. Slender pillars. Chatting dark elves. Intersectio-

The flood of information became too great for her tired mind to handle. Already weakened from draining her own life energy, she slowly toppled forward from her seated position, unconscious.

Last edited: Sep 9, 2017

Contamination Concerns

A mess of tubes, pipes, and cables crisscrossed just underneath the ceiling, blocking the view of carved crystals, rune-covered gears, and colourful glass spheres. Suspended bowls of dry ice dispensed clouds of grey fog that slowly drifted towards the tall metal cylinders lining the catwalk below.

The double row of looming, barrel-shaped devices had an unexpected gap. A dozen imps with clear gems stuck in their foreheads were crawling over a half-disassembled furnace, working with blank expressions.

Three-fingered hands simultaneously traced a double line of arcane glyphs across a metal cover, finishing at the same time. Silently, the steel split apart as if the symbols were a seam, and the detached piece dropped towards the fog-covered floor.

Three more imps near the base of the furnace raised their hands and caught the fallen piece without interrupting their attempts to unscrew the hatch in front of them. Without apparent communication, they left the fallen part to the middle one, who stuffed it into his bag. He somersaulted and disappeared with a green swirl. A few seconds later, green motes gathered in the same spot, and the imp reappeared with an empty bag.

Above them on the catwalk, two more imps with clipboards were making sketches of the disassembling process in meticulous detail, never looking up from their sheets.

A loud, single heartbeat thundered in the distance.

From the direction of the treasury, a female voice exclaimed, "Uh-oh!"

In complete unison, the imps turned their heads towards the lights that were turning on behind an invisible, fast-moving border that was racing in their direction.

When it passed them, a loud siren started blaring, drowning out the distant thumping of the heart. Two coil-wrapped protrusions concealed between the pipes and tubes on the ceiling started humming, and the smell of ozone permeated the air.

The imps reacted immediately. Two of them grabbed a third and hurled him at the activating trap.

The ballistic imp reached for the coil-wrapped rods as he hurtled through the air, his unblinking black eyeballs reflecting the glow of the lightning building between the two protrusions. He was almost touching them when it discharged, firing a blinding bolt straight into his head.

The imp burst apart, his pieces dispersing into green mana vapour that smelled of fried meat and burning cloth. A finger-sized spike of clear crystal briefly continued on its trajectory before it clattered down somewhere among the furnaces.

The lightning trap's hum was building again when the second thrown imp reached it. With one hand, the small creature grabbed onto one of the hanging tubes that had concealed the trap. While swinging, he dragged the digits of his other hand across the base of the device.

A jagged gash tore open in the wake of the imp's fingers, and the trap went dead with a final crackling zap.

As one, the remaining imps turned towards the far part of the catwalk. They opened their mouths and started squeaking individual sounds that somehow synchronized up into words. "Midori. You assured me that she would not recover."

"Bartholomeus didn't when his heart was in this state!" the female voice from the nearby treasury shouted back. "I was under the impression that we had to grab everything we could before the dwarfs get here!"

"One example does not make a pattern. I wish to investigate. Attend me!" the imps replied in their eerie chorus as they swivelled back towards the partially disassembled furnace.

"Seriously?" came the annoyed reply. With a puff of pale sparks, a female figure clad entirely in tight black leather appeared in front of the imps. Red light spilled from the eyeholes of her mask, and the large bag slung over her shoulder clattered as she finished her pirouette. A few sapphires spilled from a scorched hole in the brown fabric. "You want to investigate now? As opposed to getting out with the loot while we still can?"

Green motes flashed into existence, and a girl made of ice teleported into the middle of the group. Without hesitation, she launched a punch at the closest large-eyed face.

The targeted imp bent backwards to let the attack pass overhead. Simultaneously, another imp kicked the ice golem in the back of her knee.

The animated statue shifted her weight on her other leg, only to trip over a third imp who had sneaked into her blind spot. While falling, she thrust her elbow at her assailant, only to have him yanked aside by the imp who had kicked her.

"Case in point," the possessed dark mistress said as the ice golem struck the ground.

The imp dangling from the tube above swung his legs and let go, plummeting towards the prone figure. With a loud crack, his pick stabbed through one of the golem's hip joints, spraying his allies with water.

Even prone and pinned in place, the statue wasn't helpless. She raised one hand towards Midori, curving her fingers into a claw-like shape.

Anticipating a ranged attack, the dark mistress turned into a blurry streak. When the golem's fingers detached with popping noises, she was already moving. The icicle-like projectiles pierced the illusory afterimages she left in her wake, and then she stomped on the statue's wrist with her hard-soled boot.

An instant later, a prone chicken lay where the prone ice golem had been.

Midori kicked at the bird but missed. Surprised, the Keeper glared at the imp who was stuffing the struggling chicken into his bag.

Without comment, the worker climbed back onto the partially deconstructed furnace, joining his comrades.

"Didn't you hear me? We have to leave!" Midori said, addressing the turned backs of the imps.

"Denied," replied their synchronised squeaks as they pried loose more pieces of metal. "I am not finished here. My curiosity is not yet satisfied."

"But you are hearing the alarms, right?" the dark mistress said, her crimson gaze pointed back over her shoulder. "More enemies are on the way."

"Unacceptable. I require more time," the imps objected as they cautiously unscrewed a smaller cylinder within the device.

The leather-clad woman sighed and raised her hands, showing the razor-sharp blades tipping her gloves. "Well, I can't exactly take on a dungeon with a single mistress."

"Understood." Four imps hopped back onto the catwalk, their feet touching the metal at the same instant. "New experiment. Evaluating the battle performance of perfect teamwork against a numerically superior foe."

Crimson eyes narrowing, Midori grabbed the two closest workers by their backpacks as they moved past. "Those are my best imps you want to risk there!"

"I shall assemble some adequate replacements for any that are lost." The short workers rolled their shoulders, easily slipping out of their restraints.

"Wait! What about the traps?"

The imps stopped as one, raising their gazes towards the ceiling. Among the distracting forest of pipes, lights, and metal boxes, any dangers would be almost impossible to spot before they claimed a

victim.

"Let's just leave," Midori urged, patting the bag of loot. "Your greater self would be quite annoyed if you lost all your gathered information while you took a needless risk."

The imps remained quiet for a few seconds. "Agreed," they finally replied with audible dissatisfaction. Each of them jumped at the same time, disappearing with a green flash at the apex of his leap.

Left behind, Midori scowled. "Damn irritating tag-alongs complicating a straightforward plan."

Ami woke to the sensation of being dragged by her armpits. Cold and hard hands were pulling her backwards, lifting her upper body off the ground in the process.

Confused and alarmed, she opened her eyes.

Immediately, bright and colourful light assaulted them.

She winced, lowered her eyelids, and tried to make sense of the blurry sights with her sleep-addled mind. Squinting, she made out spinning, flickering movements. Fire? No, it didn't burn her legs, which protruded through the curved curtain. A magical diagram.

Her heart started beating faster as awareness of her current situation returned. She tensed. Who was pulling her out of that circle? The Duke?

Flinching at the thought, she raised her head to look up.

Hair –the underside of a huge black beard – occupied most of her field of view. She caught a glimpse of an ornate breastplate before the man behind her jumped backwards, out of her line of sight.

Without the support of his hands, she flopped to the ground and barely managed to prevent the back of her head from hitting the floor. Scraping her right elbow, she rolled on her side so she could keep him in her sight.

The unmistakable figure of Duke Libasheshtan was staring at her from a few steps away, the metal parts of his armour fogged over. He looked tense, ready to move, but his gauntleted hands weren't near the weapons on his belt.

"Mercury, there's no need to attack him!" Cathy called out in her mind.

What? Oh, with her Keeper powers returned, she would be able to defend herself if she felt threatened. Which she did, a little, since the Duke was free and armed. Still, he could have killed her while she was helpless. Why hadn't he? Did he want her as a prisoner, a hostage? No, that didn't make sense. He would have kept her within easy reach of his weapons in that case.

For the moment, he seemed content with keeping his distance while watching her with a wary expression.

"What's going on, Cathy?" She asked as she sat up.

"We tried to recover you as soon as we were able to scry on you again, but he broke free from the ice before the ritual finished," the swordswoman reported. *"Tiger shouted at him mentally, trying to convince him not to hurt you. He seems to have listened, but he kept pulling you out of the circles."* She paused. *"Which might actually have been a good thing."*

She glanced around, taking in her surroundings. She was still in the trap room, with a large puddle in one corner and the mace stuck to the adamantine.

Unlike before, the room was brightly lit by the blue flames of five burning magical diagrams that were partially overlapping. They were summoning spells, easily identified by the thirteen runes dancing around their circular perimeters. Her allies wouldn't have needed to use more than one, which meant someone else was trying to claim her.

Her thoughts felt sluggish and her limbs as heavy as lead. Her short bout of unconsciousness had not been enough to clear up the lethargy from her self-inflicted energy drain. Fortunately, it didn't

seem to affect her dungeon heart.

With the assistance of Keeper telekinesis, she pulled herself to her feet and then summoned her transformation pen. She hesitated at the last moment. "I'm going to reapply my protective enchantments now. There will be a flash of light," she warned the Duke in order not to jeopardise their uneasy truce. Her voice sounded weak when she continued, "Mercury Power, Make Up!"

Magic surrounded her in a rush of blue and aquamarine light, energising her weary muscles. She felt refreshed and cleaned, as if all the accumulated sweat and dirt on her skin had been washed away. In the blink of an eye, her transformation finished, leaving her standing under her own strength. Instead of her customary pose though, she was covering a yawn with her hand. Despite being able to move her body effortlessly with her enhanced strength, she remained exhausted.

The Duke had taken a step back and was blinking rapidly at her, his gaze darting from her tiara down to her blue miniskirt and back up, lingering for a moment on the symbols decorating the collar of her black leotard. Finally, he focused on her face again. "Empress Mercury, I believe I owe you an apology."

Surprised, she perked up. That was a better start than she had dared to suspect.

"Your ability to shape the adamantine proves without a shadow of a doubt that you were telling the truth about having good intentions," he continued with his head bowed. "Your Majesty, I formally apologise for the disrespect shown to your title and person, and for the harm I may have unwittingly caused by refusing to hear you out."

For a moment, she stared at him with her mouth agape before breaking into a wide smile. Finally, progress on the way to a peaceful solution! "I accept your apology," she said, hoping there wasn't some protocol she was expected to know. Should she bow? It would probably be polite to return his bow. Grasping one hand with the other, she inclined her head. "I'm just glad we can finally try to end this needless conflict without anyone else getting hurt!"

The Duke sighed. "You probably shouldn't get your hopes up. I doubt that I still have much influence now that others have observed me not killing you when I had the chance." He gestured at the surplus summoning circles in the area.

"I'm very grateful you didn't," she blurted out with a faint tremble in her voice. She didn't even want to think of what would happen to her if she died while she was a Keeper. "Thank you for giving me a chance."

He shrugged. "I am not the kind of villain who would cold-bloodedly murder a child Empress appointed directly by the Light and of sufficient moral integrity to work adamantine." He paused. "Not that anyone's going to believe me when they see those burning eyes of yours."

"Sorry, but they are a side effect-"

"Never mind that now," the Duke interrupted her, his expression turning serious. "What's going on in my city? A female voice begging me not to hurt her sister," he shot her a questioning look, "also told me that I would at the very least need you alive for damage control."

"I'll have to ask someone. Please excuse me for a moment while I contact my advisers," she replied.

She concentrated on her dungeon and could immediately tell that there was no fighting currently going on. Nevertheless, there could have been trouble while - or due - to her disconnection from it. *"Cathy? Is everything all right back at the dungeon?"*

"Everything is currently under control here. There was a robbery and we had to scare off a dwarven assault, but there were no casualties," Cathy summarised.

Ami briefly wondered how somebody could have gotten into her dungeon and past the traps to steal from her, but the aborted invasion seemed more important. *"How did you prevent- no, tell me about the city first. What's going on?"*

"It's bad," the swordswoman began. *"I'm not even going to try to*

sugar coat it. Short version: evil magic has turned almost everyone into monsters. I'll show you on my crystal ball."

Ami paled. She had expected the magic that couldn't reach her to cause problems, but nothing on that scale. Hurriedly, she focused her Keeper sight on the crystal ball Cathy was using.

It showed her youma-like creatures populating a subterranean marketplace with a floor that was glistening with moisture. The viewpoint changed, switching to the outside of a temple with barricaded doors and windows. A swarm of hissing monsters circled the building, keeping just enough distance to avoid the lit area surrounding it.

The view changed again, moving above ground. On the surface, the city looked like a ghost town. Empty streets glistened wetly, and clouds of strange fog drifted in the breeze.

"Everyone still normal has fled into the surrounding countryside," Cathy commented. *"Aside from the dwarfs hiding in the various temples, and I don't know how long they can hold out."*

Ami gaped in horror and really, really hoped that the victims could be saved. She didn't want to be responsible for wiping out a city! She couldn't possibly have predicted this outcome, but it would still have been impossible without her actions, so was it her fault?

She was fortunate she hadn't known about this when the adamantine had confronted her with things to feel guilty about. A moment later, she felt bad about being relieved to have unwittingly deceived the divine metal.

She closed her mouth with an audible click and shook her head. No, this was no time to feel conflicted. She had to go fix things, now!

"That bad?" the Duke asked, reading her expression.

She swallowed when she realised she had to tell him that the people he was responsible for had almost all been turned into monsters. Would he be furious and regret his decision to leave her alive? "Y-yes. Very. Everyone turned into monsters!" she blurted out before

her courage could leave her.

His eyes bulged. "What?" he asked, taking a step forwards. "Explain!"

"I- I'll have someone tell you the details while I go get rid of the evil energy!" she promised, deciding to delegate the unpleasant task. *"Cathy? I need you to tell the Duke what's happening outside. Gently. Also, have the warlocks ready to cast the summoning ritual on him when I raise my hands."*

"Got it," came the quick reply.

She met the Duke's eyes. "This prison is currently buried underneath a mountain of ice," she told him with a sideways look at the multiple burning diagrams on the floor. "My warlocks will get you out of here. They'll start their spell when I gesture with both hands, so you will be sure it's them and not anyone else."

"Fine, it's not like I have a choice," the dwarf grumbled, crossing his arms.

She lowered her head. "Sorry, but I really need to try and fix this as soon as possible," she answered. "The spell should appear right now." She lifted both hands up to shoulder height.

On cue, a glowing blue light appeared underneath the Duke's feet and expanded into concentric circles.

At the same time, she mentally instructed one of her imps to teleport into a tunnel near the ice-covered prison. "I'll talk to you later!"

The Duke nodded once, scowling, but he didn't step out of the summoning circle.

Ami used her possession spell and turned into shadowy black lightning. Like smoke, her immaterial body passed through the almost imperceptibly tiny hole in the adamantine wall. As the obstacle slowed her down, the dungeon heart alerted her to her imp being attacked.

A gust of wind ripped flakes of hoarfrost off the masonry as a child-sized shape blurred past, letting out a drawn-out squeal. The imp was using speed-enhancing magic as she ran, her body leaning forward and her short legs moving like pistons.

Her pursuer resembled a small lion and was moving on all fours, propelling its skeleton-thin body forward with bounding leaps. It had a mane made of long quills that ran down its back to the tip of its tail. With each leap, the jostled spikes clattered against each other.

Ami heard this bony rattle when she shot out of the wall and into the fleeing imp's body. She stumbled, unprepared for seizing control in mid-sprint, and the noise got a lot closer. Alarmed, she turned her head.

The monster's ears flattened when it caught sight of her glowing eyes, and it hesitated in mid-pounce. Unable to stop while in mid-air, it crashed into her. While it was only about the same weight as the imp, it was going fast enough to topple her.

With the creature on her back, Ami skidded across the floor for a meter or so before her imp body came to a stop. Immediately, she bucked, trying to shake off the monster and expecting to feel its teeth dig into her neck any moment now.

Instead, she hear a noise that reminded her of a rusty chainsaw. An instant later, she felt a new minion link snap into place. The purring monster on top of her now counted as her underling.

She went still, blinking in surprise. She hadn't tried to hire the creature, so it must have decided to join her on its own. The influence of Metallia's dark magic, perhaps? She doubted it was just because of her back being such a nice, warm resting spot, even if the cat-like being showed no intention to vacate it.

"Shoo! Get off!" She squeaked, getting absolutely no reaction. She had to lift the creature with her Keeper hand in order to get up. Finally back on her feet, she activated her senshi transformation and summoned her visor.

The monster arched its back when the imp in front of it was

suddenly wearing a Sailor Mercury uniform, its quills standing on end. It squinted suspiciously at her and sniffed the air.

Meanwhile, Ami was trying to figure out what exactly she was looking at here. On her screen, she saw a wireframe model of the creature superimposed over a much smaller outline of an ordinary house cat. She let out a breath of relief. At least, she wasn't dealing with a dwarf who had been driven insane.

Where had she and the imp ended up, anyway? She looked up from her screen to check her surroundings more closely. The masonry had an odd violet tint to it, and the corners looked smoothed and distorted. Darker veins passed through several bricks like vines that had grown wild. Overall, it didn't look like typical dwarven architecture.

Her computer beeped when it finished figuring out where she was in relation to the adamantine prison. She only had to follow down the corridor to reach the enormous cave that hadn't been there before her visit.

She started running, and the wind on her face felt cooler and cooler the closer she got to the end of the widening passage. She stopped at its exit to take in the sights before her.

Ice covered the cavern's ground, rising before her into a cone-shaped hill. Craters and spiky protrusions dotted its surface where strong magical currents had discharged themselves against the obstacle. The prison itself was buried too deeply to be visible through the mass of ice covering it, but Ami's computer insisted that it was there.

The cat mewled next to her and batted at one of the tiny motes of blackish mana that drifted through the air like soap bubbles. It dispersed into multiple smaller bubbles like a raindrop, confusing the transformed animal.

According to Ami's visor, the glowing phenomenon sparkling in the air wasn't dangerous, but simply a side effect of the elevated mana levels in the room. However, it did print out a few warnings in bright red letters about the Metallia-like nature of the residual magic.

The conclusion here was clear. Most of the evil energy had been able to flow freely into the city's channels, and without a source adding more, its concentration here had dropped.

She paused, reconsidered the cavern, started typing, and quickly ran into the limitations of having only three fingers on each hand. One teleporting ice golem, switch of possession targets, dismissed imp, applied glamour, hissing cat, and one senshi transformation later, she looked like herself again. Now equipped with the required number of digits, she felt ready to analyse the location efficiently.

It certainly looked vastly different from before her imprisonment, with wider spaces, fungal-looking rock formations, and a blueish-violet colour theme. Chaotic magic, in her limited experience, generally didn't react easily with pure rock and stone. How much magic would have been necessary to create these results in the available time?

The result of her calculations appeared on the screen, and she stared at it in disbelief. There had to be a mistake somewhere. She didn't have that much magic to draw upon. Even if she did, she would explode trying to use that much! What was she missing?

Luna had mentioned about her senshi powers still maturing. Theoretically, that could mean that there was some regulation mechanism linked to her body that limited inflow so she couldn't hurt herself. If the body were disconnected somehow, then the mana would be able to flow at full blast.

She shook her head and closed her palmtop. That was mere speculation. It was much more likely that she wasn't taking into account some unknown factor. Like the fact that she wasn't dealing with dungeon architecture here, or that Metallia's dark magic was involved.

The cat-monster got bored and approached her, lowering its head.

Quickly raising her hands, she managed to block an affectionate head-bump from the mutated animal at the last moment. "No! Watch the quills!" she protested.

Prickly fate averted, she considered the mini-lion. Its minion link was

evidence for her having some influence over the dark magic that contaminated the city. If she could use this connection to draw the spread-out magic back to herself, she could stop it from doing more damage.

She nodded to herself. It was her best plan for the moment, and she could even use the dwarven ritual chamber for her idea, since it was built for drawing in magic.

Ami hadn't taken into account that she would find the casting chamber occupied. Its entrance door hadn't been replaced yet, and splashes, loud screeches, and brawling noises came from the open doorway. Sporadic flashes of colour lit the corridor outside, accompanied by hisses and booms. There was shouting, but it consisted of disconnected words that did not really make sense.

She pressed herself flat against the wall near the entrance, not wanting to be noticed by the creatures yet. *"Cathy? What's going on?"* she asked, knowing that her warlocks were tracking her with their crystal balls.

"The monsters have all been steadily getting more aggressive and territorial for a while now," the swordswoman replied. *"I don't know why."*

Crossing her arms, Ami whispered, "Shabon Spray," thrust her palms forward, and launched a stream of bubbles past the doorway.

They collided with the corridor's wall, bursting into a tide of grey mist that billowed outwards. The thick cloud rolled through the entrance into the ritual chamber.

The noises from the chamber changed, and not just because the expanding fog muted sounds. Creatures, visible as roughly humanoid shadows past the edge of the cloud, retreated with small, reluctant steps.

One red, rotund individual hesitated, sniffing as he waited for the mist to envelop him. Solid yellow eyes narrowed as he turned his

head and looked around, unable to see. With an angry snort, he went down on all fours and catapulted himself out of the cloud with a frog-like leap.

After she was fairly certain that the creatures wouldn't just charge into her fog, she felt secure enough to enter the chamber. Unhindered by her own fog, she could get a proper view of the room and its occupants, who she was already calling "youma" in her head.

Some of them were wrestling, rolling around on the ground as they grappled, punched, and bit each other. Water fountained as the fighting creatures struggled within shallow puddles.

The fighting looked brutal, and so she was happy that she couldn't see any traces of blood in the water. Then again, she wasn't entirely sure if youma blood didn't turn into dust outside of the body.

A ball of pink fire sailed past a meter above, having missed its intended target. It hit the side of one of the terrace-like platforms, prompting a nearby monkey-like creature to shake its yellow-furred fist in the direction of the offender.

Ami let her gaze move around, noting with some relief that not everybody was fighting. Dozens of the creatures were hanging back on various platforms and pillars, watching the fights. Others were merely snarling and hissing at their opponents, displaying sharp teeth and claws in order to scare them off.

"Jadeite, do you know why they are fighting each other? Is this normal youma behaviour?" she mentally directed a question at the member of her team most knowledgeable about the topic.

"They may be establishing a hierarchy," the dark general replied. *"They are also naturally vicious, so perhaps they are just bored. I haven't ever had to deal with youma who weren't already under someone's command yet."*

She could imagine him shrugging, judging from his tone. Since he had no immediately helpful information, she had to gather more herself. Was the concentrated evil energy in the air perhaps riling them up?

She tapped a few keys on her computer, and a new overlay appeared on her visor. Architecture and living beings faded into a dull grey, while concentrations of magical energy appeared in vibrant colours. The brightest knots and streams showed up in the youma and in the runic patterns forming the chamber's arcane diagrams, followed closely by the water pooling on the ground.

Seeing the numbers on the energy's composition, she frowned. The balance was wrong, consisting of a vast majority of Metallia's dark energy, rather than of her own, or even of chaotic unbound mana. There shouldn't have been that much of the dark goddess' power in the mix.

The numbers shifted by a minuscule amount even as Ami analysed the interplay between the various energies, and she suddenly understood what was happening. Metallia's energy was slowly absorbing the other types, turning it into more of itself in the process.

Unbidden, her mind imagined the conversion process continuing for as long as it found available magic, sweeping out from the city like a tide of darkness that engulfed the planet.

Paling, she started typing as quickly as she could, running the numbers. To her relief, her worries were baseless. The conversion process wasn't very efficient, at least without a guiding intelligence directing it to absorb magical power on purpose. In all but a very high mana environment, the evil energy would dissipate faster than it could reproduce.

She let out the breath she had been holding. In the short run, having a larger proportion of Metallia's power in the mix instead of chaotic mana had even been beneficial. Instead of turning into jumbles of randomly arranged limbs and organs, the afflicted dwarfs had turned into functional creatures.

A closer scan had her correct herself. Mostly functional creatures. They weren't exactly pure youma and used magic to make up for some deficiencies in their anatomy.

That discovery prompted another train of thought that made her narrow her eyes in suspicion. Focusing on her Keeper sight, she

stumbled as her point of view moved outside of her body. From higher up, she could observe the youma's behaviour as a whole.

There was definitely a pattern to their actions. The most intense fighting was happening near the pools of water and the mana-gathering nodes, with the strongest creatures defending their spots. Even as she watched, a huge, gargoyle-like creature grabbed two challengers at once and smashed them into each other repeatedly before tossing them into the crowd.

Her bad feeling intensified. They were fighting over the most mana-rich locations in the chamber. All youma needed magic to sustain themselves, and the massive influx of magical power pouring into the city had stopped when she broke out of her prison. They were turning on each other because they were hungry!

She directed her attention to the losers of those battles. They stood or sat some distance away, licking their wounds. In some cases literally so. Scratches and bruises were fading quickly, but regenerating wounds also cost them mana and worsened their hunger.

Looking at their focused, covetous expressions, she feared that they would get desperate enough to try again eventually and get hurt again. She didn't want to see the results of them no longer having enough mana to heal or to keep their bodies going. They were still innocent dwarfs caught in this disaster, after all.

She needed to step in to prevent more injury and death. The mist concealing her came apart as she willed it to go away, blowing away as if a cold storm was coming from her body. "STOP FIGHTING!" she shouted, her voice echoing through the chamber.

The closest creatures whirled to face her, crouched, ready to either attack or run. Those further away turned more slowly, some only moving their misshapen heads. There was some hopping, shuffling, and pushing in the back rows as some youma tried to get a better look at her.

With everyone staring at her, her cheeks heated up under all the attention. On the positive side, her shout had interrupted the

ongoing fights, as the combatants were focused on her now. Belatedly, she realised that she hadn't really planned what she would do once she had stopped the violence.

"You!" came an angry screech from the direction of one of the mana nodes. A dragon-themed youma, covered from head to toes in red scales, took a step forward and gnashed her teeth.

The youma around her gave her room in deference. Then again, perhaps they simply knew to avoid the long, bat-like wings that snapped open with a whip-like crack.

The crimson youma launched herself into the air with a furious wingbeat and dived towards Ami, clawed fingers extended.

"Stop!" the blue-haired girl shouted even as she placed her feet wider apart, ready to dodge. Getting no reaction from her opponent, she hurriedly fired a Shabon Spray Freezing spell at the incoming target.

The slender youma rolled sideways with deceptive speed, wings almost vertical, gliding alongside the elongated blast of glowing aquamarine bubbles. Gem-like ruby eyes flashed angrily as red scales fogged over from the proximity of the freezing attack.

The manoeuvre didn't leave Ami enough time to cast another spell. She wished she had restocked her Keeper storage after losing its contents during her imprisonment so she could use a readied attack from storage. Dodge? She didn't want to look weak while she was surrounded by potential attackers. Instead, she intercepted the attacker's clawed hands by catching them with her own.

The weight and momentum of the descending youma slammed against her palms, and needle-sharp claws dug into the skin of her wrists as their fingers intertwined. Nevertheless, while she looked like a blue-haired teenage girl, her body was an ice golem with senshi enchantments under her glamour.

Her arms were forced back, but not by much, and her knees bent as she cushioned the impact, but they didn't buckle.

With a surprised yelp, the youma tried to arrest her forward motion, but something in her arms made a cracking noise. Barely slowed, she crashed into Ami headfirst.

The young Keeper's boots squeaked as she skidded backwards, pushed by the force of the impact. Piercing pain came from the layer of fake skin right below her collarbone.

She gulped when she saw that the youma's short, straight horns were buried in her chest down to their bases. Possessing a golem body was teaching her reckless, unhealthy combat habits.

Grabbing her attacker by the shoulders, she pushed.

The stuck horns came free with a soft popping noise, and water trickled out from the wound.

The dazed youma extended a long, prehensile tongue and started lapping up the clear liquid, to Ami's disgusted embarrassment.

Grimacing, she shoved harder against the scaly creature's shoulders, propelling her away and into the ring of other youma who had approached them while she was distracted. Warily, she slowly spun around to get a better look at the beings circling her.

Each of the individuals looked distinct from the rest, differing in size, colour, and number of limbs. Some were wearing remains of their armour or had partially melded with it, while others were clad in tatters of robes. A third group, mostly consisting of those who deviated most strongly from normal dwarven proportions, wore nothing at all. In most cases, fur, scales, feathers, crystals, or a combination thereof preserved their modesty, but Ami still tried not to look too closely.

In turn, the youma lowered their heads whenever she faced them, avoiding eye contact. They seemed scared to approach her, but also curious enough to get closer.

She watched them for hints of aggression, but didn't spot any directed at herself. The dragon-girl must have been an exception. She shot a glance at her defeated attacker, who was slinking off into

the crowd. "Wait!" she called after her. The red-scaled youma had talked, even if it had only been one word. Perhaps communication was possible.

Most of the creatures around her reacted to her exclamation, some freezing up, others stopping their sluggish approach.

Wide-eyed, she let her gaze sweep over the crowd she had unintentionally addressed. She had trouble reading the less human facial expressions, but sideways-tilted heads and raised eyebrows could be taken as signs that they were waiting for her to continue. "Can you understand me?" she asked, cautiously optimistic.

"Most of them can," a voice that sounded as if the speaker's throat was clogged-up with slime replied.

Following the sound, she spotted the speaker standing on one of the tallest pillars looming above the chamber's terraces, some distance behind the crowd.

He was a squat figure wearing a robe that looked as if it had been stitched together from four huge, greasy-looking leaves. His long, dwarven beard consisted of slimy foam, its white colour contrasting sharply with his goblin-like complexion. Seeing that he had her attention, he continued, "Don't expect them to hold a conversation, however. They aren't smart enough to put more than a few words together. Frankly, I suspect they are merely accessing the memories of who they used to be to associate words with meaning."

She noted that he obviously didn't have that problem. He was also the only of the youma holding any kind of tool or weapon; in this case a long golden wizard's staff. "Who are you?" she asked.

"My name is Mengolin. I used to be the court wizard of Salthalls before receiving this dark blessing," he answered, inclining his head in a polite nod. "I came up with a clever plan when I realised that my defeat was inevitable. I protected only my mind and let my body change, certain that my unfortunate brethren would be unable to see through the ruse. I think I succeeded admirably."

"I – um- congratulations?" she replied hesitantly, feeling that his

proud grin and content demeanour contradicted his words. She would have expected a dwarf who had been transformed against his will to be more hostile and upset about it.

Among the youma surrounding her, some had turned their heads to listen when Mengolin spoke up. He wasn't able to keep their interest, and they resumed staring at Ami with curious, hungry expressions.

Nervous about the creatures inching ever closer, she asked, "Do you know why they are acting the way they are?"

"Yes, of course," Mengolin said. "You are a beacon of power and authority. As expected of an Empress. Of course they want to bask in your presence."

She flushed, unsure how to react to the blatant flattery.

"Empress," a nearby youma with long floppy ears picked out a single word from his sentence.

"Empress," another repeated, with a hint of recognition in her voice.

"Empress?" three more youma asked simultaneously. "Empress!"

She suddenly realised that Mengolin might not have been trying to flatter her, but had been accurately describing how she felt to the youma's senses. She was radiating more dark power than anything else in the area, and that included the drying-up mana nodes. Which was probably the reason why the cat had joined her, now that she thought about it. She had been feeding it.

"Empress! Empress! Empress!" More and more youma were joining in, their distinct voices melding into a deafening chant.

The eyes of a stocky youma who was the approximate shape of a penguin suddenly widened. His maw opened as a sudden flash of insight hit him, and his metal armour rattled when he dropped to one knee.

She could feel a new minion bond forming as he bowed his head.

His submissive gesture triggered a chain reaction. First, the creatures next to him aped the gesture, and then the movement spread outwards through the crowd like a wave, accompanied by the rumble of many knees hitting the ground.

Within moments, she was surrounded by a sea of kneeling youma and inundated by the feeling of minion bonds snapping into place.

Blinking, she turned in a circle and saw nothing but new underlings. Even Mengolin up on his pillar had joined her, much to her surprise. Concentrating, she sensed only one exception inside the chamber.

Her previous opponent, the red-scaled youma, was climbing one of the pillars. Body wrapped partially around the stone column, she snarled at Ami upon noticing her attention.

"That one's different, your Majesty," Mengolin commented, following the blue-haired teenager's gaze. "Used to be a fairy. Doesn't know how to behave in the presence of nobility."

"Fairy? But-" The only fairies she could reasonably expect to be in the area were the diplomatic corps from the Shining Concord Empire, whom she had asked to talk with the dwarfs on her behalf. It made a certain amount of sense that a baron would send them on to his liege, rather than negotiating with them himself. "Oh no. They were here when this happened!"

Guiltily, she tried to figure out which one of the sisters she was looking at. Visually, there was little to identify her by. The redhead perhaps, judging from her colour? "Anise? Roselle? Dandel? Cerasse?" she tried.

The mutated fairy twitched when she heard the names. She swept her gaze over the crowd, batted her wings, and took to the air. Keeping close to the outer walls, she started flying in a lazy circle.

Ami didn't know what to make of that reaction until the dragon-girl darted sideways, out through the doorway, and disappeared down the corridor. "And now she's trying to find her sisters," she speculated, resisting the urge to give chase. Her reason for coming to this chamber hadn't become less urgent just because there was

one more issue to deal with.

"Cathy, please have some warlocks locate the fairy sisters. Thanks!" she delegated, somewhat assuaging her conscience.

Right now, her first priority was stopping the dark energy from claiming more victims, and then she needed to keep the transformed dwarfs from hurting each other. "Mengolin, I need to use this casting chamber. Can you help me operate it?"

"Your wish is my command, Empress!" the former dwarf replied. "You, you and you!" he shouted, singling out three of the youma. "Start cleaning up the crystal lattices over there, the Empress demands it! All of you on the northern dais," he shouted, whirling around to a different group. "Move! Get off there!"

Seeing that he had the situation well in hand, she mentally contacted the other specialist whose knowledge would be invaluable for the task. *"Jadeite? What's the best way to exert control over dark energy that has spread over a large area?"*

She didn't have to wait long for an answer. *"Depends on what you want to achieve, but in general, you first need…"*

Last edited: Nov 24, 2017

Disaster Relief

A pitch-black sun made of evil energy floated below the arched ceiling of the dwarven ritual chamber, the truck-sized sphere radiating a bright pale light despite its colour.

Eyes blazing crimson and skirt whipping in the wind, Ami stood directly underneath the concentrated dark energy, her arms raised towards it. With her will, she forced the ball of magic to contract even as it struggled to escape her grasp.

The wind emitted by the sphere intensified, pushing dust and debris outwards, across the magical circle surrounding her. Pebbles burst into splinters as they touched the glowing diagram, except for those lucky enough to cross the section that had just blown up.

Ami clenched her teeth as she considered the sizzling scar that marred the intricate designs on the ground. She shouldn't have rushed so much and tried to force the issue.

"Almost done," Mengolin shouted in his phlegm-choked voice. "A little bit more. Done!"

The scraping of stone against stone cut off as the chamber's rising and lowering half pillars locked into place. Circuits inscribed onto their surface at different altitudes linked up with the main arcane pattern on the ground, compensating for the damage.

The ball of dark magic above Ami stopped seething and threatening to burst out of its containment.

"Thank you," she replied in relief, breathing deeply. "Good work."

With a faint smile, she stared up at the concentrated mixture of Metallia's energy and chaotic magic, feeling the satisfaction of a job well done.

Smoke and sparks rose from the curved scar on the ground where crystalline lines had burst under the strain of too much power

coming in too fast.

She revised her assessment to a job done quickly, which amounted to the same thing in this case. By co-opting the city's amazing infrastructure, she had been able to suck the magical contamination out of the environment within a matter of minutes. It would claim no additional victims.

Cries of awe came from the entrance to the chamber, where a crowd of youma eyed the ball of contained magic with longing gazes.

At their sight, her satisfaction faded, replaced by dread. The transformed dwarfs in the city would not be happy that she had just snatched away their food.

The frost patterns on the walls shrank and faded as if the stone was sucking them in, the mist cleared, and the puddles on the ground drained away with a slurping noise.

Tilia's sharp senses noticed the oily pressure of dark magic rapidly fading from the area, leaving the air dry and empty. She should have felt relief, but instead she felt an unfamiliar void in her stomach.

Judging from the loud wailing that echoed all around her, she wasn't the only one to notice.

The hand she was holding twitched in her grasp, trying to pull away.

She looked down, suppressing a wince at the sight of her yellowed, ridged skin that reminded her of a chicken's foot. With practice she had gained over the last few hours, she pushed aside her disgust and despair. It could have been worse. At least she could still think clearly, unlike her sister. The one sister she had managed to keep track of in this mess.

Melissa tried to pull away again, and Tilia tightened her grip.

Bones, soft and malleable, gave way underneath her fingers as flesh yielded to the pressure. The first time that had happened, Tilia had a

small panic attack, believing that she had seriously injured her sister.

Melissa had been fine, though. While she looked relatively unchanged, aside from being a light shade of blue all over, her body now had the approximate consistency of a sponge. Her flesh compressed and stretched as easily as it popped back to its initial shape after being deformed, apparently without causing pain or lasting harm.

At least, the mutated fairy wasn't showing any discomfort from having her wrist squeezed down to the approximate thickness of her index finger. She was examining the surrounding walls with a searching gaze and trying to move in the direction of a humid-looking corridor with an arched ceiling.

In that direction, two groaning mutants were lying on the floor, their limbs showing large tooth marks.

"Wait. No! Why would you even want to go that way?" Tilia said, maintaining her grip.

Her sister turned her head and growled at her, baring pointed teeth and narrowing her eyes.

Her lips twitched, ready to twist into a snarl. How dare she challenge- no, stop, calm down. There was no need to fight. It was only the stupid dark magic making her angry. Calm down, calm down, calm down. She focused on her breathing until she was sure she could control herself before she met her sister's eyes. "Why don't we go that way instead?" she suggested, pointing down a less ominous passage. "There's no more magic around here, and I think there's a temple in that direction. We could get some help there."

Melissa blinked at her a few times, as if confused by her sister's hopeful tone. After a few seconds, she turned away, her expression blank, and continued looking around.

"A temple is pretty magical. There might be food?" Tilia tried again.

A sudden voice in her head distracted her from her efforts.

"*Everyone, this is Empress Mercury speaking,"* the owner of the mental voice introduced herself.

Melissa's arm jerked in Tilia's grip, and the mutated fairy's spongy wings lashed around like flexible whips as she twisted and turned, searching for the speaker.

Tilia ducked her head as one of the wings flew right at her face, elongated by centrifugal forces. She sighed. Leave it to the dark empress to make her life more difficult again.

"*If you have been affected by the transformative magic, then you may be feeling hungry right now. I am going to place sources of magic that can satisfy that hunger at…"*

Tilia listened as Mercury named a number of locations that the locals would presumably recognise, but that meant nothing to the visiting fairies.

A moment later, she stumbled when Melissa made a far more enthusiastic attempt to run off.

"Stop! Wait!" Tilia ordered, getting an angry hiss and a glower in reply.

"*And don't fight each other, there should be enough for everyone,"* Mercury continued. *"Also, please don't fight or hurt the unaffected dwarfs if you encounter them. Or, um, at least bring them to the magical crystals."* Her voice was wavering a little as she continued, *"Those should have the same effect as the water had. Just don't kill anyone, please!"*

"That fiend!" Tilia shouted. "She's trying to get even more people corrupted!"

An angry snarl came from Melissa as she struggled harder to pull her along.

"Wait! Where are you going?" Tilia protested. "You don't know how to get to any of those places. Just come along with me, the temple will be easy to find!"

Melissa slowly raised her free hand and pointed at a few transformed dwarfs in the distance, all of whom were moving in the same direction.

"You want to follow them?" Tilia asked, disturbed by the way her sister's extended arm was sagging at the middle like a wet noodle. Unfortunately, she couldn't think of any good reason why that plan wouldn't work. "Oh, all right," she conceded. Melissa didn't look as if she was willing to budge on this, and she didn't want her to get them both lost again with that gross slime wave dashing ability she had somehow acquired.

Satisfied, the blue-coloured girl took the lead, stomping after the creatures more familiar with the area.

Still holding her wrist, Tilia followed, keeping an eye out for her other sisters. She wasn't actually opposed to feeding, but she worried about the cost. This was the dark empress offering them food, which could be seen as a kind of payment. Wouldn't accepting turn them into minions, just like poor Camilla? No, they would have to render some kind of service to Mercury for that to happen, if she understood things right.

Melissa started pulling harder when Tilia's steps slowed and her expression grew more worried.

The dark empress had given specific instructions. Don't fight and don't hurt anyone. Could going along with those instructions count, even if it had been your intention all along?

Tilia felt that would be evil and unfair. Given they were dealing with a Keeper here, that was enough to make her believe it would indeed count. "We can't go along with her orders. We'll have to beat someone up on the way," she thought out loudly, which earned her a confused look from her sister. "And- yes! It's not payment if we *steal* it!"

When the pulse of flame-shaped magic faded, a gust of warm and humid air hit Duke Libasheshtan's face. His surroundings had

changed, and he was in a dungeon. Empress Mercury's dungeon. A shiver ran down his neck even though he knew that he shouldn't be in danger. Nevertheless, the three warlocks standing at equidistant points of the magical circle he found himself in didn't exactly make him feel safe.

He couldn't help wonder if the three men really were warlocks when he took in their appearance.

The ornate staves and the beards fit, though their clothing didn't. They were wearing what was either large loincloths or very short skirts – he couldn't tell the difference under the mass of the garish glass beads and feathers covering them.

As their scrawny physiques and maggoty complexions assaulted his eyes, he instinctively took a defensive stance, his hand moving to his sword.

In response, the warlocks backed away, lowering their staves at him as they created distance. A few spear-wielding orcs that had been standing further back suddenly looked more alert, their stances less slouched.

The Duke's eyes darted about as checked his surroundings. He wasn't looking for a fight, but if one was inevitable, he didn't want to be blind-sided. The room itself was large, with a wide-open area for the magic circle on the ground, and a high ceiling. No cover near him. No shadows for enemies to hide in either, as the place was well lit by a number of lamps protected by cages of icicles. He did spot two closed doors with metal inlays, noting them as potential exits.

"Stand down. No fighting!" a female voice ordered from behind him.

He whirled around, reluctantly taking his eyes off the potential enemies before him.

A woman was sitting at the head of a long table laden with candles, books, and other odd tools of the warlock trade. His first impression was that she looked like an older version of Empress Mercury who had picked up weightlifting as a hobby and had fallen into a vat of orange paint. For a brief, incredulous moment, he actually mistook

the black strips of cloth that formed her leotard for a part of her stripe pattern, and heat rose to his cheeks.

"I am Tiger, Mercury's sister," she introduced herself, the corners of her lips moving upwards as she noticed his blush.

He noticed two short horns on her head as she nodded in greeting.

She looked at the warlocks and the orcs and made a shooing motion with her hand. "Leave us. Your presence is no longer required."

"At once, Princess." The creatures bowed and filed out of the room closing the door behind them with a heavy thud.

They had left him his weapons and followed her orders without hesitation, even if that meant leaving their unarmed princess alone with him. Obviously, they believed her to be more than able to defend herself if necessary. She was dangerous, so politely averting his gaze wasn't an option even though her relative lack of clothing made him want to cringe.

"Your Highness," he replied with a terse bow that was just deep enough to satisfy formalities.

"Please, have a seat," Tiger said invitingly, gesturing for him to come closer. There was an unoccupied chair at the corner right next to her.

He approached her cautiously, unsure whether or not he could trust her. She had pleaded for the safety of Empress Mercury and looked similar to her sister, but did she share the latter's convictions?

"So, my sister told me that you are aware of her true alignment. Don't tell the other minions, most of them aren't. They probably wouldn't believe you anyway, but there's no reason to cause unnecessary problems."

Well, that answered his question. "Agreed." He paused for a moment. "What, exactly, is my current status here? Am I a prisoner, or am I allowed leaving?"

"Huh, Mercury actually didn't specify. Bringing you here was simply

the fastest way to get you out of that box." She shrugged. "Consider yourself a guest for now."

"In that case, I would appreciate transport back to my city as soon as possible," he stated. Salthalls was going through the greatest disaster in its history, and he wasn't there to help.

"Oh. I was hoping I could convince you to stay and negotiate on our behalf first. Mercury still wants a truce with your kingdom, or at least with your Duchy. Even a ceasefire long enough to leave your lands would do." She pointed at a large rectangular mirror that was resting against a pile of books. "I have a variant crystal ball right there," she said, sounding hopeful.

"Negotiate? This isn't the time for that! I need to know what's going on at home. I need to get back there, aid my people, and get the situation under control!"

Tiger's expression softened. "I understand that you are worried and want to do your duty, but the best way to help your people is to get the other dwarfs to back off," she said.

"I don't-" he began, but the princess raised a hand to stop him.

"Please, let me explain. Mercury is already doing everything she can to bring the situation under control. She would be much more effective and could bring more resources to bear if she didn't have to worry about her dungeon being attacked."

He shook his head. "That may be true, but you are neglecting important aspects of the situation. First, the people who haven't been turned into mindless monstrosities won't cooperate with your sister. I need to be there to keep them from charging off into danger. I'll also need to contact the dwarfs who managed to flee and arrange for supplies, food and shelter from the surrounding villages."

The black-striped woman didn't look entirely convinced yet.

"Second, there were over thirty thousand dwarfs in the city, and she turned almost all of them into demons! Do you really think there's anything I can say that will prevent the King from trying to stop her

before she can do it again? Especially when my credibility is shot because I'm contacting him from inside his enemy's dungeon?"

"Oh. That's…" Tiger trailed off with an embarrassed sigh, her fingers drumming the top of the wooden table as she thought. She looked up suddenly. "Turning them back might help?"

He sucked in a sharp breath. "Turning them- you mean curing the transformed people? Is that even possible?"

Tiger nodded. "I think so. I have an idea that would get them back to normal. More or less."

"What?" That qualifier didn't exactly reassure him. He searched her face for any hints of deception, unwilling to allow himself to hope just yet. "Please, do go on."

"Putting them into a temple should restore their minds. At least it did for me." She paused, putting a finger to her chin and looked thoughtful. "Well, at least I think the Avatar's mantle counts as a temple, so there's that."

"Wait, you were…" The Duke trailed off, observing her more closely as he pondered the implications. Had Tiger been turned into an insane monster just like the transformed citizens? He imagined her without her horns and her odd colouration, which left her looking like a normal human.

However, she didn't have any of the strange deformities, protrusions, or extra limbs that afflicted his poor vassals, aside from her horns.

He inspected her more closely until he realised that staring at her body like that might give her the wrong impression. "You used to be human?" he asked, his thoughts racing. It would explain how she could be Mercury's sister despite looking demonic. It would also mean that the empress had been experimenting with the foul magic that had contaminated his city before.

"Oh, no, I was never human. I'm adopted," Tiger explained, completely derailing his train of thought.

"But the family resemblance!" he protested, gaping.

"That's more complicated. I'm a magical being called a youma – which is what your citizens have been partially turned into. Anyway, we youma have malleable forms." She perked up. "Which is actually the second half of my solution. The body fits the self-image. Restore their minds, and their bodies will snap back to their original forms. The only thing stopping that is partial transformations and chaotic mutations, but we could probably turn them into full youma with a sufficient dose of dark magic."

"They would only appear like normal dwarfs, but they would still be youma, wouldn't they?" the Duke asked, not nearly as enthusiastic about her plan as she looked.

"Well, yes, it's not a perfect solution." Tiger shrugged. "But you have to admit that sane and normal-looking would be a great improvement over their current condition. Oh, I have to tell my sister to try this!"

The large park in front of the dwarven palace's east face was crowded with youma. They circled a tall spike of black crystal that jutted out of the ground, trampling the flowerbeds as they basked in the magic it gave off.

"Everyone new, move to the fountain and follow Mareki's instructions," Ami shouted from the balcony overlooking the area. "She's the one waving the big blue flag!"

A number of youma who had just entered recognised her from the huge posters of empress Mercury she had positioned at all entrances. New minion links formed, and the majority of the group moved to follow her instructions.

A new group of youma rushed towards the remaining feral mutants and started luring them away with splinters of the tall black crystal.

Ami's gaze darted towards the centre, where more of her recently hired help was carrying wounded and weak youma towards the

source of magical power. She swallowed heavily when she spotted the baby and toddler-sized creatures that some held in their arms. "Widen the lanes! They need to stay open at all times!"

The crumbling of rock behind her distracted her. Tiger stepped out of the dust cloud, letting go of a coughing Duke Libasheshtan. "Did my idea work?" she asked, looking around curiously as if expecting to find a cured dwarf somewhere near Ami on the balcony.

She shook her head. "I need to run some experiments to see if it's safe before I try it on people. The idea is sound, but I have to address the more urgent problems first." She gestured at the crowds below.

The Duke uncrossed his arms, nodding in approval. "I won't complain about putting the safety of my citizens first. What's the situation and how can I help?"

Ami hesitated for a moment as she wondered where to start. "Well, the magic that contaminated the city is over there now." She pointed at the black crystal. "At least part of it. It is no longer a threat."

The Duke's clenched jaws relaxed slightly.

"Pacifying the youma- I mean the transformed citizens – is the most urgent remaining issue." Her shoulders drooped. "They need mana to live, they are aggressive, and when there isn't enough mana, they fight each other for it. They also join my forces and follow my orders if they meet me in person."

The Duke grimaced at that, visibly unhappy at the idea.

"I'm managing a few sites like this one, but most of the city remains outside of my reach. They ignored my telepathic messages, but I think you may have more luck. They should be used to listening to your orders."

He nodded. "That makes sense, but I can't send telepathic messages."

"I'll have a solution for that in a moment," she replied.

An imp appeared with a burst of green magic. The coverall-clad creature was small, her helmet coming only up to Ami's waist, but she immediately invaded the larger girl's personal space and started doing a strange sort of dance.

Ami raised her arms awkwardly to avoid the imp bumping into them and shifted left and right as the small worker cavorted around her. She almost lost her balance when she was bumped in the side while she was trying to avoid her left foot getting stepped on.

"What are you doing?" the Duke asked with a dubious expression as he watched her undignified dodges and stumbles.

"Claiming territory to build on," Ami explained, bending sideways to prevent a small elbow from colliding with her belly. "I always count as a piece of my own land, so the imp can claim a piece of terrain right next to me while I'm touching the ground."

The small creature giggled and waved her arms more frequently, forcing Ami to dodge and twist at even more awkward angles.

"The evil little critter is being annoying on purpose, isn't she?" the Duke growled.

"Probably," Ami admitted. "The imps are quite mischievous when- ah, here we go."

A puff of aquamarine steam rose from the ground around her feet and dissipated before it could billow out much further. The floor itself had also gained a bluish tint that was more pronounced between the seams of the precisely cut dwarven floor tiles.

With a pout, the imp moved further away from Ami and continued her claiming dance in order to expand the young Keeper's new territory.

"I have a little terrain now, which will last for as long as I remain on it," Ami explained as she focused on her treasury. "It's just large enough for a tiny scavenger room. Please step back."

A muffled swear came from the Duke when a head-sized bulb shattered the recoloured floor from below. Shaking off the broken

shards, the flesh-coloured knob shot upwards on a fast-growing, veined stalk. Two lids peeled back completely, revealing a glassy eyeball that turned to stare at the Duke.

He took a few steps away, his cheeks paling as he stared at the undulating construct. "What the hell? How is that- that gross *thing* going to help?"

"That's a scavenger room. Touching the eyeball allows the user to send mental messages," Ami explained, "It's usually used to lure in potential recruits. I hoped you could use it to contact your citizens."

"I see," the Duke replied, approaching the eyestalk with a blank expression. "Do I have to take my gauntlets off?"

"I don't think so," Ami replied, giving him an encouraging smile.

"Small mercies…" He placed his right palm on top of the glistening orb, which ducked and quivered under the weight. "This feels odd, but- yes, I think I understand how it's supposed to work."

Another imp ran up to Ami's side, pulling a crystal orb from her backpack and offering it to the blue-haired girl.

Making sure to keep at least one foot touching her claimed territory, Ami approached the Duke. "Here, I'll show you where I placed the big crystals," she said as she held the glowing device up for him. "That way, you can explain to your citizens where to find them. I hope you can convince them to stop fighting and to bring the injured, too."

The Duke slid his fingertips over the giant eyeball, minimising contact despite wearing gauntlets. "I can certainly give it a try."

Cathy's voice spoke up in her mind, *"I'm getting reports from several warlocks that the youma have suddenly started moving towards your crystals."*

The Duke twitched in surprise and looked up, not having expected the mental message.

"*We aren't sure whether that's because they respect the Duke's*

authority or whether he's simply better at describing the way," Cathy added.

"Well, that should only take a moment to test," Tiger said. She looked at her adopted sister. "You'll have to hide yourself."

Ami's face lit up in understanding. "Ah, you are going to make him confront a feral youma face to face? Right, just give me a moment." She moved into a claimed corner of the balcony and created a cheap room with three thin but opaque walls and a door.

Tiger disappeared as the walls grew around Ami, smoothly rising from the ground. A few seconds after the construction finished, the black and orange youma teleported back in. As usual, she was covered by a rapidly disintegrating rock shell, but this time, it was larger than usual.

As the crumbling stone covering peeled off, it revealed Tiger and a slightly smaller humanoid with a pink exoskeleton.

The new youma had been grabbed from behind and was hissing and spitting as she tried to wriggle free from the restrictive bear hug.

"Hurry, this thing is pointy!" Tiger shouted at the Duke, head held sideways to prevent spines from digging into her cheek. "Any day now!"

The dwarf turned away from the huge eyeball, stood straight, and met the captive's eyes. "Hold!" he said in a commanding voice. "I am Duke Libasheshtan, the rightful ruler of this city. You are safe, so cease your struggling. You will not be harmed."

The captured youma's head turned towards him, eyes with cat-like pupils narrowing as they looked him up and down. The creature growled at him and struggled to break free.

"Doesn't look like it's working- ow!" Tiger flinched as her captive managed to jab a thorn-tipped heel into her shin. Reflexively, she withdrew her leg and lost her balance.

With a burst of strength, the pink youma broke free from her loosening grasp. She leapt forward, out of Tiger's reach, and snarled

at the Duke again. Her next leap carried her towards the armoured figure, claws extended.

"Definitely not working!" he shouted as he ducked behind the questionable cover of the undulating eyestalk, perhaps hoping its sheer repulsiveness would ward away the attacker.

The youma landed in a crouch, teeth bared. Her muscles tensed as she readied herself to pounce on him, but then she went still for no discernible reason. Blinking in confusion, she slowly rose back to her full height – just in time for Tiger to land on her back and tackle her to the ground.

The tiger-striped youma let out a surprised yelp when the pink-shelled creature underneath her vanished without warning and she dropped the remaining distance to the ground.

"I've got her!" Ami shouted from behind the walls surrounding her. "She got recruited somehow," she explained in a puzzled tone, absently selling off her temporary shelter.

"Recruited?" Duke Libasheshtan asked, turning to face the rectangular construction that was melting away like heated wax.

"Yes, I noticed a new link with the dungeon heart forming and placed her into my storage," Ami explained, stepping over the last remnants of the fading walls. "She is safe; I'll let her out later."

"Why would she suddenly choose to become your minion when she couldn't see you?" he asked.

"It happened when she landed on the claimed ground," Tiger pointed out, tapping the floor next to where she was sitting.

Ami nodded thoughtfully. "That makes sense. The dungeon heart must have treated her like a mindless neutral creature, such as giant beetles and flies. They get recruited when they enter dungeon territory."

"Mindless creatures…" the Duke muttered angrily under his breath. He shook his head, squared his shoulders, and sighed as he looked at her. "I can't believe I'm suggesting this, but my poor citizens

would be safer as your minions than the way they are now. Could you please send out your imps to claim more of the city?"

Surprised, Ami blinked and looked over at the imp that was still doing her claiming dance, barely a few metres from where she had started. "I could, but the city counts as enemy territory. They would make barely any progress."

"I see." He watched the capering imp proceed at a snail's pace for several long moments, stroking his beard with a conflicted look on his face. His shoulders slumped as he seemed to reach a decision. "Guess there's no choice," he said, almost too quietly to hear.

Ami turned towards him in alarm as he stepped before her and bowed deeply.

"This is a terrible idea, but it is also simply acknowledging the facts. Empress Mercury of the Avatar Islands! I, Thol Libasheshtan, Duke of the city of Salthalls, formally surrender to you. The city of Salthalls is yours by right of conquest."

She gaped at him in surprise and dawning horror. "What?"

"Usually, there would be more of a formal ceremony, witnesses, and all that. Nevertheless, this seems to have fixed your ownership problem."

The territory-claiming imp was now barely pausing between stops, making soft whooping noises as she darted from place to place.

"It- it certainly did," Ami murmured, noting that the claimed territory was slowly starting to expand on its own, just as it had on the Avatar Islands back when she had gained the title of Empress. She met the Duke's eyes. "Th-Thank you. This can't have been easy for you. I'll make the most of this opportunity!" she promised.

A horde of imps appeared around them, filling the air with a green snowstorm of motes. They darted off in every direction, claiming terrain as they moved in long, straight lines to cover as much distance as possible.

Tiger chuckled as she watched the differently-coloured paths slowly

grow wider on their own. "So *this* is how one accidentally conquers a city," she teased.

Ami winced. Right now, she neither wanted nor needed to think about how this would give everyone who didn't know the details the wrong impression.

Last edited: May 28, 2018

War Council

Within a small chamber, King Ral of Nimbadnur sat at an undecorated wooden table. Across from him stood one of the various rank-and-file wizards whose name he didn't bother remembering. The hooded mage had his hands on a brightly glowing crystal ball, which projected his shadow onto the script-like wards engraved into the walls.

Both wizard and king were showing identically incredulous expressions as their eyebrows crept towards their hairlines.

"She WHAT?" Ral broke the silence as he shouted at the crystal ball in front of him.

Within the transparent orb, the image of Duke Libasheshtan cringed. "My Liege, I know it sounds unlikely-"

"Unlikely? Try impossible!" he interrupted.

"I beg your pardon, but she was able to work the adamantine," the Duke repeated his preposterous claim. "I saw it myself. You are aware of what this means, naturally."

King Ral nodded gravely. "Yes. Yes indeed." He understood perfectly that there were several possibilities, some of which he could discard due to the gold-patterned marble pillars visible behind the Duke. Since he was inside a temple, he could be neither an imposter nor an illusion, and mind control or possession could be excluded too. "It means that you were completely taken in by her deceptions, Thol!"

The Duke flinched. "My Liege, I understand that this is a tempting interpretation, but there is proof! Simply scry on the adamantine box to observe its damaged wall," he suggested.

"The box hidden under ice? The box whose interior doesn't show any damage? That box?" With each question, his voice became more acidic.

Duke Libasheshtan seemed to shrink. "The hole is under the mace that's sticking to the wall," he explained.

"Which, surprise, means it can't be seen," he replied, crossing his arms.

"It exists! The wall is punctured! It has to be! She couldn't have escaped otherwise," Duke Libasheshtan insisted.

"Unless the trap never closed properly," he pointed out dryly as he managed to regain his calm. He shouldn't direct his anger at the confused Duke, but at the monster who had caused him all this trouble. Poor Thol looked as if he had aged years in the past few hours.

"But we were completely cut off from the outside," the Duke pointed out. "Even scrying didn't work on us!"

"What's more likely, a Keeper piercing adamantine or said Keeper finding a way to block scrying?" he asked. "One who has been temporarily unscryable in the past?"

The dwarf in the crystal ball grimaced. "But I could sense the seal hardening…"

"Thol, you have to face the facts. The Dark Empress and her illusions deceived you. I'm sure that if one of the priests were to check you for magical residues, he would find quite a number of them."

"From the potions I imbibed before our confrontation," the Duke protested stubbornly, shaking his head.

The King sighed. "Enough," he said. "I do not have the time to keep arguing with you. Try to shake off Mercury's influence and don't cause any more damage," he half-ordered, half-pleaded.

"But-"

The dwarven ruler leaned heavily on his cane as he rose from his seat and addressed the wizard, "Sever the connection. You may go rest; I won't require your services in the immediate future."

"Thank you, Sire." The mage let the light within the crystal ball fade with a relieved expression. He bowed deeply, and a few beads of sweat dripped from under his hood onto the floor.

Ral turned without a word and approached the chamber's exit. He parted the jingling curtain of wards that covered the door and pulled it open, and the noise of heated discussion assaulted his ears.

"-at the limit! If I had a way to recharge the flywheels faster I'd already be using it!" Duke Alnisalath, a rather large dwarf with a greying beard shouted down at the much shorter Duke Cattenor.

Seated just to Alnisalath's left, the slender dwarf leaned away from his neighbour, grimacing as flying spittle landed in his short-cropped hair.

"You are both morons!" the rotund Duchess Ducimezar shouted as she slammed both fists onto the table, causing their goblets to jump. "Why are you discussing logistics when she can just do to our army what she did to Salthalls?"

The white-haired Duchess Lalimush stared unhappily at the wine droplets that had landed on her map. Her wrinkly hand rose and made a rude gesture in the other Duchess' direction.

At the same time, a wad of paper flew over the empty chair reserved for Duke Libasheshtan and smacked Ducimezar right in the forehead.

Duke Omerreg gave her a flat look as she turned towards him with an outraged expression, his arm still raised from his throw. "Read the damn reports, will you? Countess Zasod did-" He stopped as he noticed the King returning to the meeting. "Your Majesty," he greeted, rising from his seat.

An instant later, the four other dukes followed his example. Lined up on the side of the table closest to the readied hero gate, they stood with their heads respectfully inclined.

King Ral's gaze swept over them, lingering for a moment on the gap where Duke Libasheshtan should have been. "At ease," he said,

approaching his own throne at the head of the table.

Wooden chair legs scraped over the ground as the nobles seated themselves.

"My discussion with Thol was less than satisfying," he began, absently stroking his beard. "He is physically safe within a temple-"

A few of the expressions along the table brightened.

"- yet his mind remains thoroughly compromised by whatever the Dark Empress did to him," he continued, dashing the rising hopes. "Consider him lost to the enemy for the time being."

"For someone like him to break so quickly…" Duke Alnisalath said, shaking his head sadly.

The others looked uneasy, perhaps imagining such a thing happening to them.

"That said, have you made any progress while I was occupied?" Ral asked, not expecting much after the previous display. Marshalling troops faster in response to an unforeseen catastrophe was difficult when one had already been doing so at top speed before.

To his surprise, Duke Omerreg nodded and picked up one of the scrolls before him and shoved it in his direction. One of the advantages of using the hero gates to meet in person, rather than wasting limited scrying ball capacity on communication. "In fact, this is a report on one of the leads you had us investigate. The human Baron Leopold confirms that Keeper Mercury had the opportunity to interrogate him, though he remembers no such thing happening during his kidnapping."

With a loud bang, the King's fist struck the table, making wine spill from shaking goblets once more.

"She played me for a fool!" he exclaimed in sudden anger. "She knew! She knew all along!"

"S-Sire?" Duke Alnisalath asked, looking hopelessly confused.

The King gritted his teeth. "Baron Leopold acted as the bait in the trap that killed Keeper Bartholomeus," he hissed. "Mercury knew to expect an adamantine box and incorporated it into her plans!"

Unlike his frowning fellow nobles, Duke Uzolgim looked thoughtful. With a hesitantly optimistic tone, he said, "Sire, I believe this may be good news."

Ral focused on the haggard, black-bearded Duke in surprise. "How so?"

"Don't you think it explains a lot about how she managed to pull off her attack on Salthalls?"

He met the Duke's expectant gaze with a confused look. "You may have to elaborate a little. Not everyone here has studied at a magical academy."

Uzolgim paused, his hand absently starting to adjust the clasp of his purple cloak. "Ah, yes, pardon me. Normally, a magical ritual of the observed magnitude and duration would be impossible to conduct in enemy territory, due to being too vulnerable to interruption. However, if she was expecting the adamantine trap, then she could have arrived with the intent of keeping it from closing and using it as shelter – all while keeping us blind to what was really going on!"

"That makes a disturbing amount of sense," Duke Cattenor commented.

"It's the kind of convoluted and deceitful plot she is infamous for," Duchess Ducimezar agreed grudgingly.

King Ral groaned. "So she couldn't have done it without me." He sighed and turned to Duke Uzolgim with a nod of understanding. "The bright side, then, is that she cannot do it again."

The other nobles suddenly sat straighter, as if a great burden had been lifted from their shoulders.

Duke Alnisalath pushed aside the stack of papers with drafts for evacuation strategies. "Looks like we won't be needing those."

"Wait, can we be certain she can't do it without the adamantine box?" Duke Cattenor cautioned.

"Reasonably so," Duke Uzolgim replied. "She's still busing trying to establish control over her victims. That means she couldn't do it directly with her ritual, which indicates a lack of precision – likely the need to work through a tiny gap in an impenetrable barrier."

"Well, I'm convinced," Duke Omerreg said. "Doesn't really change that we need to reach and destroy her as soon as possible."

"I still say we should attack right now!" Duke Alnisalath suggested. "The forces besieging her dungeon could take her by surprise since she's busy elsewhere!"

"Nonsense, that's completely out of the question due to her ability to turn people into monsters," Duke Cattenor objected.

"We have countermeasures! Like most people here, I actually read my paperwork,"Alnisalath said as he glowered at Duchess Ducimezar.

King Ral had skimmed the report in question. Before fleeing through a hero gate, Countess Zasod had recovered some of the adamantine wards that had been used against the invader. They provided a bubble of safety against the contaminated water, repelling it. Unfortunately, the repulsion went both ways, which made crossing larger bodies of water rather impractical.

Duke Cattenor pinched the bridge of his nose in irritation. "We can't protect the prisoners in her dungeon. If she turns them into monsters, then our besieging forces will be hopelessly outnumbered."

"Which means we are stuck with the original plan of massing our forces and hitting her with everything. Except now we need to do so before she can receive reinforcements from Salthalls," Duke Uzolgim summarised the situation.

"The railway tunnels between Salthalls and Whitemountain have already been blocked?" King Ral verified.

Duke Omerreg nodded. "Blocked, trapped, and put under observation. She won't be using our own infrastructure against us."

"Good. What's the current worst-case scenario you came up with?" the King asked. "Her flying ships? Teleportation?"

"I have given the elves access to our hero gates," Duchess Ducimezar replied. "Their wizards should be able to deal with any flying transports."

"Right. And the teleportation?" King Ral looked at Duke Uzolgim.

"She doesn't have enough warlocks to teleport a strategically relevant amount of troops," the cloak-wearing Duke replied.

"I'm glad to hear that," Ral replied.

"Wait," Cattenor said, "what if she creates more dungeons between her current one and Salthalls and then transports her minions?"

Duke Uzolgim winced "That's- it would be risky and expensive, but it's not impossible," he admitted in a chagrined voice.

"Oh, our wizards will love to hear that there's something else to look out for," Duchese Ducimezar grumbled. "They are about ready to keel over from exhaustion."

King Ral made a quick decision. "Duke Uzolgim, adjust the scrying rotation appropriately to take that threat into account. We will have to rely on the intervening villages to spot any troops travelling from Salthalls to Whitemountain." Untrained peasant militiamen might not be up to assaulting a dungeon, but detecting enemy troops near their village was within their capabilities.

"It shall be done."

He considered the most aggressive of his Dukes. "Duke Alnisalath, your troops are close enough to Duke Libasheshtan's lands to arrive this evening. You will be the vanguard of our army and secure the most likely locations her troops would have to pass through. Our highest priority for now is preventing her from linking her forces!"

Ami, unable to leave Salthalls without losing her local territory, had claimed one of the palace's vacant offices as her temporary workroom. The missing owner was probably a noble, given the expensive wood paneling on the walls and the size and craftsmanship of the desk. If there was anything to complain about, it was the chair's thick padding. It was so comfortable she risked dozing off if she closed her eyes and took a break.

For the moment, however, she was fully alert and concentrating on her work. Despite the outcome of her ill-fated attempt to initialise negotiations– or perhaps because of it– the dwarfs still refused to listen to her or to her representatives.

She sighed and tried to convince herself that, technically, she hadn't made her situation worse. They had already been ignoring her diplomatic efforts and trying to kill her before. What she had really lost was time during which the dwarven army continued gathering and approaching. In return, she had gained a dwarven city of dubious usefulness and a whole lot of additional complications. Nevertheless, there were enough demi-youma within Salthalls to keep her dungeon heart safe, if she could arrange for appropriate transport.

Her palmtop computer was open in front of her, showing the schematics of the large tunnelling machine she was designing. Trains were her most practical option for transferring people and materials between the two locations, but she had decided not to co-opt the dwarven railways. Potential for sabotage and roadblocks aside, none of them connected all the way to her dungeon. If she already had to create the equipment for building part of the tracks, then she might as well use it to construct a new, direct line to Salthalls.

It should be possible before the bulk of the enemy forces arrived. With a large drill coated in imp pick metal and a treasury-derived power source like the one used by her reaperbots, she was expecting her machine to dig through the underground at least at walking speeds. The distance between her dungeon and Salthalls was about 250 kilometres in a straight line, so about fifty hours of digging. If she used two machines and dug from both directions,

they would meet in the middle in a little more than a day. Enough time for her to design a room blueprint for laying tracks, as well as the trains themselves. In addition, Jadeite was testing a few ideas for helping out with his glamour.

Best of all, she could potentially get away with this before the dwarfs noticed, as long as all the work happened in complete darkness to protect it from scrying. She should provide a distraction, too. Sabotaging their railways to slow down their approach would work, and perhaps she could use her airships to-

"My Empress? Pardon the interruption, but I have run out of test subjects," a mental message from Monteraine derailed her train of thought.

That, at least, was a problem she could solve quickly. She shifted her Keeper sight to a tiny hatchery back at her dungeon. Hens and yellow-feathered chicks scrabbled in the dirt of the square pit, their heads bobbing up and down as they gobbled up the unearthed worms and maggots.

Mentally apologizing to the unsuspecting birds, she forced a spell into the pit's wards crushing it into chaotic mana, and then added a trickle of Metallia's power to the mix.

Replicating the calamity that had befallen Salthalls on a small, controlled scale wasn't difficult, but she disliked the need for animal experimentation. The dense, black fog streaked with rainbow colours spread through the tiny hatchery, and the contented clucking turned into disturbing pops and screeches.

She zoomed her Keeper sight in on the empty cages lined up on Monteraine's lab table. One by one, she transported the mutated chickens into the metal containers.

Immediately, the vaguely bird-shaped monstrosities started throwing themselves against the bars.

The clattering alerted the black-haired sorceress, who glanced over. A pleased smile appeared on her face. "Thank you, your Majesty," she said, addressing the air above the cages. "Would you like a

progress report?"

"Yes, please," Ami replied. A single glance at Monteraine told her why the chickens were trying to escape.

The older woman was wearing an apron covered in blood over her barely-there dress and holding a crimson-stained cleaver. From her other hand dangled a dead mutant chicken, held by one of its four legs. Its left wing was smaller than its right, and stitches surrounded it, clearly visible through the plucked gap in the corpse's plumage.

Without looking, the sorceress carelessly tossed the dead chicken towards a large waste bin, where the salivating goblin inside caught it.

"Very well. So far, replacing mutated body parts with healthy organs has been a complete success," she said, "in as far as there were zero incidences of the transplants becoming contaminated. Long-term survival rates are still unknown, though they don't look good for the current batch of test subjects. I didn't check for compatibility in order to get faster results. "

That didn't bode well for the unconscious birds in the cages stacked against the wall. Ami regretfully made a note to have their suffering ended quickly. Perhaps their original purpose of ending up as some creature's meal would have been a kinder fate. *"That's… that's valuable knowledge, but we have neither enough surgeons nor spare body parts for this to be an applicable solution,"* she informed Monteraine.

The sorceress shrugged. "Regeneration could solve that problem." She paused. "And provide some surgery practice too," she added, sounding thoughtful.

That conjured up a whole lot of disturbing scenarios. *"Youma do slowly regenerate on their own when provided with enough magic,"* she pointed out. *"They wouldn't need transplants."*

Monteraine shook her head. "Of course, your Majesty, but the amputated parts grew back wrong for about half of my regenerating test subjects." Her expression turned contemplative. "My current

theory is that the cuts were simply in the wrong place, passing through subtly contaminated tissue. In that case, just trying again in other spots once the subject has sufficiently recovered might work." She made a few enthusiastic chopping motions with her cleaver.

Ami paled and was suddenly glad that Monteraine wasn't anywhere near any unfortunate dwarfs. *"I would prefer a less invasive solution. Depending on the location of the infected body parts, removing them would be fatal."*

"A fair point," the sorceress agreed. "I admit I'm curious about whether or not I'm having more success with this than the Light priests."

"Well, they don't seem to have any trouble curing the corruption-induced insanity," she replied. *"Unfortunately, my sister's idea doesn't seem to work as well as I had hoped. The basic idea of the youma's shape being influenced by its self-image is valid, as far as I can tell with animals."*

At least, the fully youmafied chickens she had delivered to the dwarven temple had turned into proud, formidable-looking birds, which she considered a good sign. Of course, an issue remained that complicated her evaluation.

"However, mutated youma flesh – as opposed to healthy, normal youma flesh – stays mutated even when the youma's shape changes. Fortunately, their bodies are adaptable and can work around the mutations so this doesn't kill them." She paused. *"For as long as they don't get turned back to normal."*

"They can already turn them back to normal?" Monteraine blurted out, sounding almost offended.

"Yes, the dwarven priests have a ritual that exorcises dark magic, which returns the youmafied parts to their original state," Ami elaborated. *"It's somewhat similar to one of Jadeite's Glamour spells running out of power."* However, she wasn't as elated as she should have been about that discovery. Her stomach lurched as she remembered the outcomes so far. *"But it only works on the youmafied parts. Healthy flesh and mutated bits – they don't get*

moved into proper alignment or changed to fit, and, well, the result is rather messy."

Monteraine nodded along, mollified. "How intriguing! Could I – no, wait, the goal is having more troops." For a moment, she looked disappointed before her expression turned confident. "Actually, I believe one of the possibilities I'm looking into could be an expedient solution for this problem." With a few deft steps, she walked over to an alcove and pulled aside the curtain separating it from the rest of the lab.

Its green-skinned occupant started and looked up from the necromantic tome resting on the pedestal in front of her. Landra brushed a strand of cyan hair out of her face as her button-like purple eyes focused on Monteraine.

"Continue with your studies," the sorceress told her.

The youma looked puzzled, but nodded and resumed reading.

Ami was a little surprised to find Landra here, but after a moment of thought and a quick look at the page, she approved of her learning some healing spells. Landra currently didn't have any special abilities of her own, unless being attractive by human standards counted. Upon closer inspection however, she spotted something horribly wrong with the elf-looking woman's left earlobe.

A small, bumpy tendril the size of a caterpillar dangled from the bottom of the large, triangular ear like a wriggling earring.

"Monteraine, what's that mutation? Are you experimenting on her?" Some anger was seeping into Ami's voice. *"You were explicitly forbidden from harming anyone!"*

Monteraine stiffened. "G-general Jadeite volunteered her since she's not good for much else! Besides," her tone steadied, "there's no harm done. It's an earlobe. Completely irrelevant to her overall health. People get them pierced for cosmetic reasons all the time." She waved the hand holding her cleaver dismissively, causing Landra to flinch as a droplet of blood flew towards her.

Ami breathed in deeply, trying to remain calm. The explanation made some twisted sense, even if it was against the spirit of her orders. The harm done was certainly insignificant when compared to her current problems, so she could overlook it for the moment. *"For future reference, you are not to perform any experiments on non-animal test subjects. Now, what did you want to show me?"*

Monteraine bowed her head. "Of course, my Empress. At first, I was planning to see if a youma could exert enough conscious control over her body to move the mutation."

Landra nervously eyed the cleaver as Monteraine waved it back and forth between her earlobe and the tip of the ear.

"But then, I noticed something interesting. Regular test subjects are just a confusing mishmash of various degrees of mutation and youmafication all blending into each other. I couldn't even begin to guess what their healthy state would look like, let alone try to heal them. However, with a full youma, it's actually pretty simple to tell what's wrong. The remaining mutations stand out similar to wounds or foreign tissue. This should make them susceptible to treatment with regular healing spells."

Ami perked up. If she turned the victims into full youma and had them healed of their mutations, then the priests should be able to turn them back to normal without complications. *"How long would it take for a competent healer to remove someone's mutations?" s*he asked, considering the logistics.

Monteraine shrugged. "It completely depends on their extent, complexity, and location. Could be a few hours for mild cases, but most would probably take a week or more."

"Oh." Ami slumped in her seat, disappointed. Even if she assumed that all of the dwarven priests had been safe in their temples and were willing and able to help with the healing, there were around thirty thousand patients to treat. It would take years to cure everybody.

"Is that too slow? We could always just chop the mutated bits off." Monteraine pointed with her cleaver at Landra again.

The youma backed away and covered her ear protectively. "What? No cutting!"

"Oh, don't be such a cry-baby! You can grow it back! There's nothing to complain about!"

"It would still hurt!" Landra shot back, glowering at the dark sorceress.

"That falls under not being allowed to harm anyone, Monteraine! No amputations!" Ami reprimanded her, disturbed by her enthusiasm.

The sorceress seemed to shrink as her shoulders slumped. "As you wish. In that case, I have a question that may be relevant."

"Yes?"

"When you transform a test subject into a youma, can you aim towards a desired outcome?"

Ami paused. Could she influence the resulting youma's form? So far, she had simply been flooding the mutated chickens with Metallia's power until they turned into full youma. *"The possibility hadn't occurred to me yet,"* she answered even as she decided to ask for Jadeite's advice on the subject. *"Why?"*

Monteraine smiled. "Oh, I have an idea that could work…"

Last edited: Aug 3, 2018

Extended Mining Operations

Someone was insistently knocking on the temple's door hard enough to rattle its stained glass window, and showed no intention of stopping.

Gnashing his teeth at the thought of the centuries-old artwork taking damage, Brother Momuz rushed over, unlocked the door, and yanked it open. He breathed in deeply, ready to unleash a tirade about respecting priceless masterworks on the offender.

A bright light shone right into his eyes, forcing him to squint at the grossly obese visitor who was wearing a yellow helmet with a lamp in its centre. No, wait, it was actually just an imp standing behind a large metal pot.

The only reason he didn't slam the door in its ugly face was that it probably would resume knocking.

"Oh. Another delivery?" Sister Tosid's voice came from behind him.

With a metallic screech, the pot slid forwards as the imp kicked it over the threshold.

Momuz barely managed to pull his sandaled feet away before the heavy cooking utensil could slam into his toes.

The pot came to a rest but continued shaking on its own.

He glowered at it, and then at the imp, deeply unhappy with the situation. "Is that another chicken? Why is it in a pot? The previous ones were in wicker baskets!"

The imp tilted her head aside and stared at him with her large, pitch black eyes. A moment later, she fished a large scroll from her backpack. Baring her teeth in a mischievous smile, she ignored his extended hand and threw it at his face.

He made a startled noise as the roll of paper bounced off his head.

Before he could complain, the imp was already running off.

Snickering, she crossed the bridge leading over the decorative pond outside and hopped over the line of colourful discharges where holy ground held off the expansion of the dungeon beyond.

"Brother Momuz, are you all right?" Sister Tosid asked from close behind him, sounding worried.

He let the angry scowl fade from his face. "Yes, yes, I'm simply annoyed by that vile little creature." He opened the scroll and added in a resigned voice, "Let's see what this says."

At least the handwriting was neat and easily readable. Nevertheless, he paled and swallowed. "It's from the Dark Empress herself. Says she personally modified the chicken in that pot."

Sister Tosid nervously tugged on her sleeves and lowered her voice, "Is- is it really acceptable to do this? It feels…"

"Treasonous?" he completed her sentence with a dark look. "We do have orders from the Duke himself to find a cure using all available resources."

She looked at the ground. "Yes, I know, but it kind of feels like skirting the edges of the law," she admitted.

"We will simply have to trust in his judgement and in the Light. He was here in the temple, so he shouldn't be under outside influences," he replied. However, he secretly mirrored her concerns. There was no denying the fact that some degree of collusion with the Dark Empress was happening.

For the sake of the victims disfigured by Mercury's magic, he could temporarily set aside his concerns about the lawfulness of a investigating a potential cure. Helping them would be worth it, even if relying on a Keeper's aid made him feel as if he needed to scrub himself clean. Besides, he didn't actually dare to refuse her requests, especially since he'd soon have to worry about food…

They carried the pot past the pews and close to the large altar that vaguely resembled a huge anvil covered in gems and gold-filled

engravings. It was the safest spot for experiments, as evil magic would be greatly weakened in its presence.

He placed the pot down within the tiny pen made from overturned pews that they had used for previous chicken experiments, and shook his head when Sister Tosid reached for the lid. "The note says to read all of the instructions before beginning, so let's see. Huh."

He waved her closer as he quietly read the key points out loud. "Only cure insanity when subject is fully healed… it has redundant organs… it regenerates lost mass…" His eyebrows shot upwards as he reread the words before him. "The thing is liquid?"

The female priest blinked and looked into the pen. "Wait, that's a pot of chicken soup?"

The container rocked and shook, making clanging noises.

"Very angry chicken soup," she amended.

He finished reading the note and put his hands on the lid. "Aside from the delayed insanity cure, we can use almost the same procedure as before. The only weird thing is that we are supposed to chase the creature around a bit until it has left behind all of its solid parts."

"That sounds simple enough," Sister Tosid said, though the dubious look she was giving the limited room within the pen somewhat contradicted her statement.

"Well, no choice but to give it a try." He unscrewed the lid with a deft motion.

At the pot's bottom rested a reddish, transparent liquid with irregular chunks and veins suspended within. It went unnaturally still the moment light fell on it. An instant later, it contracted into a ball shape and launched itself upwards.

He yanked his head backwards, too slow to avoid the gross, slimy liquid splashing all over his face.

"Ah, I suppose straining the chunks out with your beard works too?" Sister Tosid commented with a nervous laugh.

Momuz clawed at his beard ineffectually as his fingers simply passed through the liquid. "Less terrible jokes, more help!"

"Right! By the Light, sleep peacefully!" she intoned, and a tendril of blue light snaked through the air, connecting her index finger with the slime on his face.

The thing went limp and stretched out into a long, sticky thread as it flopped unto the floor. Somehow, it stayed in one piece even as it splashed into a shape that reminded him of a splatter of vomit.

He grimaced, all too aware of the wobbly chunks left behind in his beard. The sensation made him shudder in disgust. The weight of the fleshy tumours and root-like tendrils lessened as part of the dirt disintegrated into dust. Unfortunately, some blood and bits of offal remained behind. "Urk, the smell!" he complained, feeling bile rise in his throat.

The slime on the ground undulated slowly, presumably still asleep.

While Momuz was wringing out his beard, Sister Tosid had procured a mop and started shoving around the viscuous ooze. The liquid held together well, leaving no droplets behind. However, the solid bits and pieces that swam within gradually stuck to the floor and came loose.

"Do you think the solid stuff is mutated tissue that didn't transform properly?" she asked, watching the deteriorating remains.

"That would make sense," Momuz agreed as he used his sleeve like a washcloth. He frowned at the mostly inert slime on the ground. "I'm more concerned about that thing's pustules though. Ugh."

Ugly boils and bumps were growing on the ooze's surface, giving it a diseased and plagued look.

Sister Tosid instinctively edged away even though there was no realistic chance of contagion, given the altar's proximity. "It might be growing back lost mass?" she guessed after a moment.

"Regenerating on its surface, rather than where it was hurt?" Momuz asked, dubious.

She shrugged. "Well, it's a liquid. I don't see any wounds, so it probably doesn't care where it lost stuff."

He paused as he considered the idea, and then threw up his hands in disgust. "Bah, I don't even want to consider how much magic is necessary for that thing to stay alive."

The slime in question eventually stopped looking sickly as its surface smoothed out.

Sister Tosid used her mop to slosh the monster around some more, but there weren't any more pieces coming off.

"I think it's ready," Momuz said. "Do you want to do the honours?"

"After you," Sister Tosid declined. "I'm still un-slimed and would like to remain that way," she added, sounding slightly smug.

He looked down at his stained vestments and hands, grumbled, but accepted her logic. He squatted down, hands glowing as he muttered a diagnosis spell and poked the oozy puddle.

The liquid felt surprisingly warm, and apparently suffered from extreme exhaustion. Its anatomy was utterly incomprehensible but alive.

He could feel the mostly water-flavoured magic holding it together. There was also an uncomfortably large helping of evil, ice, and corruption mixed in.

Shuddering in revulsion, he watched his healing magic stir up the insides of the being, moving liquefied parts to different locations for reasons he couldn't discern. "It's done," he announced when he sensed that there was nothing more for him to do.

"Well, time to restore its sanity, then," Sister Tosid said as she proceeded to sweep the slime into a bucket. Carefully, she raised the container up onto the altar and inclined it until a tendril of liquid dribbled down onto the consecrated surface.

The bucket in her hand shook as the tendril whipped back into the main mass and the slime woke. With a loud slurping sound, the ooze rose and sculpted itself into the shape of a chicken. The transparent, red-tinted bird peered over the buckets edge curiously, wobbling with each jerky move of its head.

Both priests looked at each other and joined hands, ready to exorcise the evil magic afflicting the creature.

Oily black streaks shot out of the bird and burnt with a bright flash. With bulging eyes, the chicken wobbled and stretched, and then it fell over.

"Did it work?" Sister Tosid asked as she stared down at the feathery, normal looking bird in the bucket.

Momuz reached down and grabbed the hen, who feebly batted her wings. The light of a diagnosis spell seeped from in between his fingers. "It feels healthy enough," he concluded in a disbelieving tone. "There's a few remaining issues, but nothing life threatening. Some more healing spells and she'll be fine."

There was a delighted squeal from Sister Tosid. "It's a working cure? Oh, oh, I can handle the rest, I'm not feeling as drained as usual!"

"Maybe that's because it was already in the right shape?" he speculated, also feeling elated by their success.

However, Sister Tosid suddenly froze and paled dramatically. "W-wait, one of us will have to meet with the Dark Empress to report this, correct?"

The echoing boom of an explosion shook the underground. Moments later, a thin jet of water burst from the curved rock ceiling, ripping loose a chip of stone. It bounced off the boring machine below with a metallic ping, barely audible over the noise of the drill. Rock groaned, and water gushed everywhere as the cracks widened. Within moments, larger stones rained down on the train-

sized machine, their impacts hard enough to knock it out of alignment. Water was already pooling around its wheels when the ceiling caved in completely, crushing the engine under rock and flooding the tunnel.

Ami's view of the ruined machine was lost as her last imp teleported out of the area. Instead, she saw the narrow corridor she had been walking through for the last twelve hours. It ended only a few steps ahead of her, but an imp was digging through the rock at the same pace she was advancing. A second worker was claiming the newly excavated space, producing brief flashes of aquamarine light that revealed two more imps fortifying the walls.

"My apologies, your Majesty," Torian's voice intruded into Ami's thoughts. In her Keeper sight, he was glowering at a crystal ball that showed mud-covered dwarven soldiers high-fiving each other near a small village. *"We were expecting their attack closer to the stream up ahead. There was an unpredicted aquifer, and with us not knowing the positions of their hero gates-"*

"Don't worry about it," she interrupted. *"Successfully defending a tunnel outside of my dungeon's area of influence was unlikely to begin with,"* she assured him.

Which explained why she was down here in a tiny dark corridor so deep underground that sweat turned into steam from the ambient heat. Her imps could claim territory up to sixty kilometres out from her dungeon heart or from herself. Thus, by travelling said distance from Salthalls towards Highroot Mountain, she almost doubled the length of the tunnel section that was part of her dungeon territory while still maintaining her claim on the city.

The dwarfs knew that she was moving, of course. She had detected multiple attempts to scry on her so far, but she didn't think her opponents would attack her directly. Why commit forces merely to chase her away when it was harder than assaulting her new railway tunnels?

Case in point, they had gone for the tunnelling machine currently outside the borders of her territory. It implied that they understood Keeper distance limitations and could somehow detect her –

admittedly noisy - digging operations.

Without Keeper transport, her ability to deploy defenders was limited to having youma teleport them in, especially if she wanted to avoid damaging the tunnel. A few ice golems couldn't really do much against a more numerous enemy willing to bypass them in order to damage her equipment first.

She hoped the dwarfs were satisfied with their easy victory. After all, she didn't want them to keep looking and finding the second boring machine digging a tunnel at a greater depth than the first. The noise of the collapsed tunnel above flooding should mask the sounds of its drill. If the dwarfs found it anyway – well, they would be surprised when they encountered its defences.

The ice golem body she possessed kept moving on its own, carefully putting one foot in front of the other and brushing its left hand against the wall in order to maintain uninterrupted contact with her claimed territory. This allowed her to focus her attention on working remotely.

She looked up a map, taking note of her current location and updating the positions of her boring machines. *"Jadeite?"* she contacted the dark general mentally. *"You can drop the glamours; one of my tunnels has been spotted."*

"Understood. We are proceeding to the critical phase, then?"

"Yes. Please make sure the civilians stay calm, this will be an unfamiliar experience for them," she told him.

At the top of Highroot Mountain, the airships anchored to the looming citadel fell out of the rainy sky one after the other. Their huge, elongated silhouettes came apart from the top, canvas flaking away as if it was burning up. The metal ribs underneath shattered as the vessels started to fall, breaking up into smaller and smaller pieces. Remnants of the gondolas disappeared last, leaving only the anchor chains to plummet into the depths.

Baron Sodnil grinned widely has he lowered his telescope. "Impressive work!" he complimented as he gave the slender man standing next to him a pat on the back that made him stagger. "Much faster than last time!"

The tanned, shivering and pointy-eared elf caught his balance and turned to face him with a puzzled expression. "But, but we didn't do anything?" he said, sniffling as he pulled his fur coat tighter around himself.

"What?" Baron Sodnil furrowed his brow and stared back up at the tower of black stone that remained bereft of its airship fleet. He turned back to the elf, but the bunker's door flew open at that moment.

A scout burst into the room and shouted, "Illusions, my Lord! They were illusions!"

The Baron whirled to face the panting dwarf clad in a rain-drenched hooded leather cloak. "Illusions? The flying ships weren't real?" he asked even as his hackles rose. Had the enemy not only managed to dig a tunnel, but also to smuggle out troops right under his nose?

The scout stared at him with his mouth open, a small puddle of rainwater forming around his feet in the sudden silence. "I don't know anything about no ships, my Lord," he said after a moment. "I'm talking about the monsters!"

"What? Explain!" Baron Sodnil disliked not knowing what was going on. He had the sinking feeling that he would dislike finding out even more.

"The enemy troops! They just disappeared along with the dungeon's fog! There's nobody down there!"

"That doesn't make any sense! They must be hiding, because…" He stopped as he caught movement in the distance from the corner of his eye and whirled to face the window.

The stone tower on the mountaintop was melting away like wax in a blacksmith's forge. Occasionally, something sparkled like gold in the

runny mass that was evaporating into nothingness.

Baron Sodnil paled as he put the pieces of the puzzle together. As expected, his horrifying conclusion didn't make him any happier. He grabbed the elven wizard by the arm and rushed towards the door. "RUN! RETREAT! ALL TROOPS, GET OUT OF HERE NOW! Away from the mountain!" he shouted at the top of his lungs.

He hoped he was wrong. In that case, abandoning his position here was likely a career-ending mistake. If he was right, however, then the Dark Empress had just emptied out her dungeon and left herself defenceless. Which meant she was about to blow them all up with some kind of huge, indiscriminate attack before they could take advantage. Dungeon hearts couldn't move, after all.

A vehicle resembling a cylindrical tank cart slowly advanced through the new railway tunnel. It was far larger than a regular train cart, big enough that it needed to use both of the parallel tracks, and its many wheels groaned under the weight of its armour.

Flexible rubber tentacles as wide as a man's torso protruded from the sides of the self-propelled machine, giving it a caterpillar-like appearance. Some stuck to the walls, elongating as the vehicle advanced, while others remained loose.

Whenever one of the taut tendrils was stretched close to the snapping point, one of the escorting imps ran down its length and dug its pick into the block of ice that kept it attached to the wall. At the same time, other imps would rush ahead of the machine carrying one of the loose tentacles and press it against the tunnel's surface. One freezing spell later, the formerly loose appendage was firmly connected to the masonry, and the imp performed a claiming dance on the ice block.

King Ral let out a long sigh, his breath streaming over the cold surface of the crystal ball and causing it to fog over. "So," he said, turning towards his assembled Dukes. "That dungeon heart is moving while still maintaining a connection to its territory. As far as we can tell, all of Keeper Mercury's assets from Whitemountain are

currently within the unfinished tunnel. Suggestions?"

Duke Alnisalath shuffled awkwardly. "They are only moving at a brisk walking pace. I've managed to get troops in position, but they can't get in. She fortifies the tunnel walls with steel wherever someone tries to break in."

Duke Omerreg shuffled his papers, nodding his head. "Oh. Yes. Naturally, she can afford to do so after plundering Salthall's treasures. What a disaster."

"Is there any chance we can amass enough troops in time to successfully intercept her?" the king asked.

"Effectively impossible as of roughly an hour ago," Duke Uzolgim stated drily. He raised his hand to pre-empt Duchess Lalimush when she looked as if she was about to contradict him. "I can state this confidently without even considering our own logistics. The area of influence extending from her own body and that from her dungeon heart will be touching before we can get in position. At that point, she can reinforce any breach with troops from Salthalls."

King Ral seemed to shrink as he let himself drop onto his throne. "Damn it all. What are we supposed to do now?"

Last edited: Sep 29, 2018

A New Home

The underground train station resembled a widened tunnel section, its greater diameter offering enough room for four parallel tracks under the curved ceiling. Two of them, both occupied by one stationary train each, were dead ends. On the other two, the short, armoured wagon that carried the dungeon heart rumbled past. It slowly descended into a tunnel that led deeper underneath Salthalls. From the ceiling descended a steel gate as thick as a man's torso and sealed the passage, muffling the sound of the thunderous heartbeats that emanated from the wagon.

Meanwhile, the occupants of the other trains continued disembarking and moving towards a much larger, rectangular hall that merged with the enlarged tunnel at a right angle.

An open hatch as wide as a barn door revealed a crouching dragon squeezed into a compartment. Its large, scaly head emerged from wagon onto the crowded platform, prompting a few startled cries from orcs and goblins who had to jump aside. The head on top of a sinuous neck swung left and right like a pendulum as the dragon gawked at his surroundings, jostling some of the passers-by.

A goblin, pushed over by the impact, started to complain before she squeaked in fright and rolled aside. A clawed foot stepped down close to where she had been, and the entire wagon started tilting sideways as the dragon shifted his weight. About halfway emerged onto the platform, he suddenly froze as his eyes were drawn to the brightly lit balcony set high in the reception area's back wall.

Ami was watching her disembarking underlings from a throne framed by attention-grabbing blue banners that cascaded down the wall. She heard the indistinct muttering from below become louder and more irritated when the dragon stopped. Her troops didn't appreciate being cooped up in a train for hour and hours, and they didn't hesitate to loudly voice their frustration when somebody blocked the way.

"Mercury! Jered!" Cathy's voice distracted her. The blonde swordswoman emerged from a door in the back that led to the staircase. Winded from the long climb, she was breathing heavily, but that didn't slow her down at all when she threw herself into the arms of the brown-haired man standing close to Mercury's throne.

"Glad to see you too," he replied as he returned the hug.

Cathy let go after a moment and turned towards Ami, her smile giving way to a raised eyebrow. "I'm surprised you are here already. I thought you would be arriving once your dungeon heart was settled in."

"Oh, I had it stop for a moment when it was close enough to the city to maintain my territory in order to transport myself," Ami explained. "That's why the trains slowed down for a short time."

"Ah, I must have slept through that," Cathy replied.

"Lucky you," Jered sighed. The wavy bangs hanging into his face couldn't hide the dark circles under his eyes. "I can't believe I'm now wishing that I had travelled trapped in a small box filled with horrible monsters instead of one full of children." He raised his arm, swung it slowly in Ami's direction, and pointed a finger at her. "It's your fault my life stopped making sense!" he whined teasingly.

Ami shrunk back a little and blinked at him. "I, um, I suppose children can get a little excitable when they are bored?"

"Or when the walls suddenly start rushing past at insane speeds," he commented.

He was referring to the second half of the trip, when the slow tunnelling machines had met up and moved out of the way. At that point, her trains had finally been able to move at full speed down the finished tunnel, becoming too fast for the dwarfs to threaten them.

"Once the kids stopped being terrified, they became curious. So did their parents," Jered continued, shaking his head with a pained expression. "So many, many, many questions."

Behind him, Cathy put a hand over her mouth as she tried not to

laugh. "Speaking of questions, Mercury, is there a particular reason why you are personally supervising your troops' arrival?" she asked, her tone becoming more business-like.

"Yes. I want to make sure that they are really paying attention when I lay down some ground rules," Ami replied. She was particularly worried about the goblins and their short attention spans.

There was a loud clanging noise as a reaperbot walked into the railing of one of the bridges leading across the tracks. Case in point.

Cathy nodded approvingly. "It's certainly going to make more of an impression coming from you than from me." She paused. "Do you want the vampire bats out of their crate for this?"

Ami hesitated. "I actually have no idea how they will interact with the aquifer above. Best to keep them as bats until we figure it out," she decided.

"I see. I'll have to adjust the guard shifts and rotations accordingly." Cathy reached into her backpack and pulled out a few sheets of papers with rows and columns covered in her handwriting. She held them out to Ami. "Here, let me know if there's anything else you want changed."

Ami read through the detailed schedules and occasionally made suggestions, usually where the allocation of warlocks to scrying and research tasks was concerned. It took long enough that the trains had emptied and its occupants assembled below the balcony when she was done.

She handed the papers back to Cathy, took a deep breath, and stood. Hoping she could convince her troops to behave, she approached the railing with an expression she had copied from one of her stricter teachers.

On the ground floor, the crowd had split into several groups that were idly chatting among themselves, separated mostly by species. The orcs with their pink skins and bright white manes stood out almost as much as the four towering dragons. Green was the predominant colour, as goblins, followed by trolls, were her most

numerous minions. The tentacle monsters were looking a little ill too, adding even more green tones than usual to the sea of bodies. Colourful warlock robes contrasted sharply with everything else, making them the most distinguishable of the human and near-human employees. Recognizing at a distance whether a slender figure dressed in leather was a dark mistress or a dark elf proved much harder.

The chattering died down when Ami approached the railing, and she tried not to let her unease show as hundreds of eyes focused on her. "Everyone, welcome to Salthalls," she greeted, her voice boosted by a simple spell. "Food, drink, and comfortable beds are waiting for you, so I'll keep this short."

The crowd produced a few cheers and a mutter of general approval.

"First, there will be no looting and pillaging," she declared.

The hundreds of faces staring up at her lost their cheerful expressions, and the excited atmosphere gave way to a disappointed silence.

"That's bullshit!" someone protested in a gravelly voice.

Ami had been expecting some opposition and turned her head to stare directly at the orc who had spoken up. "Is that so?" she asked. He wasn't hard to pick out of the masses. Those with more developed survival instincts had immediately stepped away from him upon hearing his shout.

His eyes widened in surprise as he suddenly found himself isolated, surrounded by a ring of unsympathetic faces and expectant grins. His head darted left and right like that of a trapped animal looking for an escape route before he dropped to his knees. "I didn't mean to-"

"Strange," Ami interrupted him, her voice drowning out his own. "I don't remember seeing you here while I conquered this city."

The orc whimpered as she kept staring at him for several seconds.

Finally, she moved her gaze away from him and swept it over the crowd, trying to make eye contact with as many of her underlings as

possible. "I'll keep this very simple. *I*," she pointed her thumb at her chest with a wide gesture, "conquered the city. *I* claimed it. It is *mine*."

This time, there were no protests from the crowd. Some were nodding nervously.

"You don't get to steal my things," she continued. "You don't get to destroy my things." She made sure to keep frowning while she swept her gaze over her listeners once more, waiting for her words to sink in. "Thus, no plundering and no pillaging. You will, however, be paid a victory bonus!"

A few goblins jumped and thrusted their fists in the air while shouts of approval echoed through the room. The warlocks reacted to her announcement with polite clapping, as well as a stray jet of fireworks from a staff.

Ami pretended she didn't notice the orc she had singled out slink away during the commotion. She raised her hands and made a shushing gesture. "Next point," she shouted, and the noises died down. "There are still temples of the Light active in the city."

A few bloodthirsty shouts came from below. One troll bounced his hammer against the ground rhythmically, producing a metallic drumming noise, and a few goblins chanted, "Burn! Burn! Burn!"

"You will leave them alone," Ami ordered loudly. "Ignore them. They are useful to me."

Confused looks and gaping mouths revealed misshapen teeth Ami would have preferred not seeing. A moment later, the monsters started exchanging looks to see what the others thought of that revelation.

Before the grumbling could start, she stretched her lips into a wide grin, trusting more in the lighting to hide its fake nature than in her acting skills. "For now." She added in a flat tone, as if it was the punchline to a joke.

A ripple of understanding went through the crowd, and the tension

dissipated as creatures chuckled.

"Finally, the other inhabitants of the city," she said, relieved about clearing another hurdle. "If you spot strange creatures you don't recognise, then avoid them. Most are insane, and many have strange powers you can't handle. They are bound to my dungeon heart, so just leave them be. They are not your problem."

Her underlings shrugged or nodded, but aside from a few intrigued looking warlocks, they seemed to accept her words.

"Told you that phrasing would work," Jered whispered. "Imply that youma-wrangling is dangerous extra work, and your minions will lose all interest."

Ami internally agreed with his assessment, but didn't visibly react because she was still addressing her audience. "Likewise, if you see dwarfs, don't attack them. They, too, are mine. In fact, don't attack anything that doesn't attack you first. That will keep you out of trouble."

A few of her employees looked a little apprehensive but didn't voice their objections.

"If that makes you uneasy, just remember that anyone who isn't supposed to be here has to first get past thousands of mutated dwarfs to reach you," she dismissed their concerns. "That's all I wanted to tell you. Now go to your new quarters, celebrate and rest!" She swung her arm to the side, and the large portcullis blocking the exit swung open. "Just follow the very obvious signposts!"

"Oh, you learned from a certain general who was unwilling to ask for directions?" Jered commented with a grin.

"Wait, Jadeite got lost guiding the civilians to their quarters?" Cathy asked.

The dark general had arrived with the rescued villagers at Salthalls a few hours ago. Their trains could move faster than the slow, armoured dungeon heart transporter, and sending them ahead of the troops had simplified the disembarking process.

"You were with him, Jered," Ami sighed as she walked back to her throne and let herself drop onto it. She closed her eyes and massaged her forehead. To be fair, she found it hard to navigate the maze-like tunnels and alleys too, and she had a complete map of the place in her head. "I'd have sent an imp to guide you earlier if you had just contacted me."

"Well, excuse me for being busy keeping people from wandering off and for expecting him to actually know what he was doing. Besides, the civilians seemed to enjoy the sightseeing tour," he replied with a shrug. "Dwarven architecture is quite something."

Ami nodded with a weak smile. "It certainly is. I'm hoping to have a closer look myself once I have a little free time."

"Say, when was the last time you had a rest?" Cathy asked with a concerned expression. "You look as if you are having trouble keeping your eyes open."

Ami straightened. "I'm awake. Just dealing with placing the dungeon heart as we talk," she explained.

"That doesn't really answer my question," the swordswoman noted as she put her arms akimbo.

"Well, it was…" Ami trailed off. When had she last slept? Not today, not yesterday. The day before, perhaps? That seemed wrong, too. "I'm fairly sure it hasn't been longer than a week yet," she admitted after a moment.

"Right. Go to bed," Cathy told her. "If there was an urgent crisis right now, you wouldn't have given the troops some time off."

"The dwarfs-"

"Won't be catching up with us for at least a day or two," the blonde interrupted. "More than a week at least until they can bring a force large enough to pose a credible threat."

"Besides, I don't think they will bother us down here," Jered commented, shaking his head. "Strategically, it's not worth the risk. The city is already lost, its main export is rock salt, and there's no

Underworld portal around. Mercury won't be getting any stronger if they let her keep it. On the other hand, an assault would have at best even odds to retake a dead city in exchange for losing most of their military."

"I think so too," Ami agreed easily. Assuming – as her opponents would - that she used the youmafied citizens as defenders, she would have close to forty thousand soldiers. Nimbadnur could field less than three times that, which would make assaulting a fortified dungeon a costly and desperate proposition. They'd also have to worry about her just turning the invaders into more mutants.

Jered scratched his head. "Then what's there to be concerned about? Assassins sneaking in?"

"Famine," Ami replied. "This city is a major population centre, but the vast majority of the dwarfs live in the countryside. The closest villages have already been abandoned, and more people will flee when the news that Salthalls has fallen spreads. I doubt the surrounding Duchies have enough food reserves to handle a massive wave of refugees."

Cathy and Jered fell quiet for a moment, shifting uneasily.

"That's- that's an unpleasant thought," the swordswoman said after a moment, crossing her arms. "But can you really do something about it?"

"At the risk of sounding callous, it's not your job to deal with it," Jered pointed out. "In fact, any dwarfs you take an interest in will just run away harder. This is a problem for the dwarven rulers to handle."

"I know that!" Ami snapped. "But I can try to arrange a cease-fire agreement so they can do something useful instead of preparing to fight me!"

Cathy shook her head, looking a little irritated. "Yeah, because they are clearly going to jump to the negotiation table immediately when they were unwilling to do so before."

"Give them some time to get used to the idea that they can't get rid of you," Jered added. "The best thing you can do right now is to get rest so you'll be thinking clearly later."

"But I can already draft plans and…" Ami started to disagree, but trailed off under the combined disapproving stares of her advisers. They might have a point.

Right now, Tiger, with the aid of imps, was doing a good job managing the youma-dwarfs. Jadeite's presence scared the more dangerous and animalistic ones away from the civilian complex, and safety tests for the de-youmafication treatment were in progress. Trying to rush those would defeat their purpose. This was one of the increasingly rare occasions where nothing urgently required Ami's attention in the immediate future.

She let her muscles relax and slumped against the backrest of her throne. "Fine, maybe you are right. I'll take a break after I finish setting up the dungeon heart and get Duke Libasheshtan's report on the state of the Light temples."

Two trolls and an orc pressed their foreheads against the red-veined floor, shivering as they knelt at the bottom of the stairs leading up to Mukrezar's throne. Droplets of sweat glistened on their bare backs, reflecting the light of the flames shooting from the deep fissures surrounding the main path.

Above them, the towering backrest worked into a horned reaper's stylized grimace scowled down at them. Its fanged expression was almost as fearsome as that of the Keeper seated underneath it.

Aside from the chattering of the minions' teeth and the crackling of the flames, all was quiet until Mukrezar's fist thudded against his armrest. The pink-haired elf leaned forward, eyes narrowed into crimson-blazing slits. "I appear to be short one tied up and crippled fake Avatar. Explain yourselves!"

The creatures before him almost broke their knobbly noses as they grovelled harder against the unyielding ground, unwilling to speak

up and draw his undivided attention.

"Answer me! You, the mottled one!" A single finger stabbed forward, singling out the troll whose green skin showed patches of lighter colour.

Reluctantly, the underling raised his head out of the tiny puddle of sweat that had formed around his forehead. "Wasn't m-m-m-me, Master! Just t-t-turning winch!" he squeaked.

Mukrezar swatted lazily at the air before him, and an invisible force struck the mottled troll with a whip-like crack, forcing his head down and bouncing his chin off the floor.

"I don't want to hear excuses. I want to know why tonight's entertainment isn't ready to be slowly lowered head-first into a vat of heated fat," Mukrezar said. "Alive, that is. There's really no point doing it to a corpse. Orc, you tell me!"

The white-maned warrior glanced briefly at his whimpering companion, who was spitting out teeth, and jumped to his feet.

"Y-yes, Master!" he said, saluting. "Reporting that the prisoner s-s-slipped."

"He slipped," Mukrezar repeated, raising his hand and wriggling his fingers. "Go on, elaborate. How exactly did a man unable to move under his own power slip?"

The orc gulped. "W-well, we wrapped the chains around his shins as usual and suspended him above the pot, but then Zogig thought that for this special occasion, we should get the fresh human fat from the kitchen." He paused, pointing at the troll picking up his teeth.

The Keeper waved dismissively. "Sensible. Go on."

Shuffling his feet, the pink-skinned soldier gulped once more. "Err, yes, so we left to fetch it, but he, well, kinda slipped out of his chains and broke his neck in the empty pot."

Mukrezar growled. "I see. You bungled attaching him."

The troll who hadn't spoken yet looked up as if stung and waved his hands defensively as he protested, "No no no no! We d-done it all right and proper! Is your fault for cutting off his feet!"

The other minions cringed and turned to stare at him with wide eyes.

Three slap-like noises echoed through the room, quickly followed by cries of pain.

"Quiet, you miserable wretches! Do you have any idea what you have done? He may have been a fake Avatar, but the real one still shares his senses! I was going to gloat at him! I had this entire taunting yet soul-crushing speech prepared! The masses would have loved it!" Mukrezar complained, sighing theatrically.

"Indeed, your Wickedness," the butler imp agreed as he stepped out from behind a demonic statue. "Especially the part where he consigns a loyal, trusting follower to brutal torture and death each time he hands out one of those plagiarised rings."

The pink-haired Keeper raised an eyebrow. "You think so? Not my favourite passage, but admittedly one of the better ones."

"Actually, I was referring to the moment where his corpse would transform back into a sheep," the Butler explained as he stroked his moustache.

"What?" Mukrezar's eyes opened so wide they resembled blank crimson discs for a moment. "I was about to monologue at a common barnyard animal?" He trembled with rage, the scar across his nose standing out more as his face reddened. "How? *My* rings can't do that!"

"I would never insinuate that you stopped when your designs were barely functional, your Brashness. Again," the butler replied. "Also, your minions are sneaking away."

The trio froze in mid-motion when Mukrezar's stare snapped back to them. The orc stood precariously balanced on tiptoes while the two trolls were still in their kneeling position, but further back from the throne than they had started.

"Ah, yes. Off to the torture chamber with you," the elven Keeper said. With a shooing gesture, he made the three disappear, and then let himself slump in his seat. "The stupidity of it all…"

"You did achieve your primary objectives, your Sulkiness," the butler pointed out as he approached the throne, carrying a bottle of wine and an empty glass on a tablet.

"Indeed, I should focus on the bright side. Another potential mantle creation site destroyed, its defenders massacred, and a volcano rigged to explode! What more could I – nah, this isn't working!" Mukrezar threw up his hands in disgust and slumped even deeper, almost sliding off his throne. "Butler! Tell me something that will cheer me up!"

"As you wish." The smartly dressed imp poured a glass of wine and proffered it to his master. "I expect you will be delighted to hear that the dwarfs finally suffered a major defeat and lost one of their larger cities to a Keeper."

Mukrezar sat up straighter. "Hah! Someone finally got one over those hairy, drunk zealots? I'll drink to that." He emptied his glass in one go, contemplating. "Keeper Mercury's work, I assume?"

"Indeed. The Dark Empress conquered the city of Salthalls, co-opting its magical infrastructure to transform everyone within the city into strange monstrosities," the imp said, a wide grin baring his teeth.

"That's hilarious!" Mukrezar laughed. "Now I'll have to come up with something even better, or I might start to feel a little inadequate here."

The imp smiled up at him innocently. "Indeed, your Enviousness. However, may I point out that you might have a little trouble performing a ritual whose power requirements rival those for creating a new Avatar's mantle?"

The glass in Mukrezar's hand shattered as he suddenly clenched his fist. "And just like that, it stopped being funny." He shook his hand, getting rid of the bloody shards stuck inside. "But seriously," he

groaned, "Is there any chance that it wasn't the city covering most of the ritual's cost? She is a freak of nature with a ridiculously unfair amount of magical power, after all."

The butler shrugged. "How should I know?" He raised his tablet just in time to block the thrown wine bottle aimed at his head. "More importantly, can you risk assuming that it was her, rather than the city?"

Mukrezar plucked the last splinters from his hand and healed his cuts, all the while keeping his eyes closed and staring straight ahead. "Going by the fact that I would be a cloud of smoke and ash if I tried channelling that much magic, I can't," he muttered sourly. "Arrgh! Now I have to add a whole bunch of nigh-invincible fortresses full of booze-guzzling vicious midgets to my list."

In the centre of the path, amidst the fire-spewing fissures, a circular section of the floor shook. Rumbling, it rose to the height of a table while its surface changed to turn into a map of the dwarven lands.

He jumped off his throne and strutted down the stairs, approaching the newly raised platform. "Salthalls, Salthalls, ah, there it is." His thumb approached one of eight glowing castle-like shapes and squished it flat. "Not so invincible as they appear. Yes. I have a good feeling about this."

"That's what you said last time, just before the glacier hit," the butler commented.

"I choose to attribute that to mere bad luck. This time will be different," Mukrezar said and snapped his fingers. A swarm of bearded beer barrels sprouted from the map around the marker he had just flattened. "The dwarven troops are busy with Mercury and not defending their cities, for one. Hmm. No doubt other Keepers will also try to take advantage of this vulnerability."

"Some opportunists softening the enemy up first will only make things easier for you," the butler said, drumming on his tablet with his three-fingered hand.

Mukrezar scratched his head. "Well, maybe. We are talking about

the dwarfs here; they have a reputation. Too many losses early on and reinforcements might dry up."

"You could try not losing so many minions, your Wastefulness."

"I prefer to keep my options open," Mukrezar said as he marked the Underworld portals nearest to the dwarven cities. "Which means I'll have to bring in some actually competent subordinates for this, not just the fodder."

The imp tilted his head to the side. "Where are you going to find some of those?"

"Some of the more experienced recruits seem promising. Keeper Reebald, to start with, showed some excellent creative thinking with his combination of pressurized barrels and bile demons."

"Yes, but the Avatar got him."

Mukrezar frowned. "That's too bad. Oh well, Keeper Lavaine had a much larger force tripping over their own feet chasing her while she wiped out isolated villages. She's ripe for a promotion."

"Avatar got her."

"Curses! Then Keeper Mir will have to-"

"Avatar got h-"

A bolt of lightning from Mukrezar's finger interrupted the butler, making him twitch uncontrollably. His moustache puffed out from the static.

Mukrezar sighed. "You'd think equipping a bunch of idiot followers with dungeon hearts and ordering them to stir up trouble would result in at least some battle-hardened survivors!"

"Keeper Tagleos counts by that criterion, your Short-Temperedness," the butler noted, unperturbed by his smoking suit.

Mukrezar stared at him blankly. "Tagleos, who's Tagleos? Oh, the rat fetishist. That one's actually still around?"

"The benefits of minions with a short life cycle who are willing to work for cheese, I assume," the imp said with a shrug.

"It's a start," Mukrezar decided as he returned his attention to the map, focusing on the Mercury symbol he had planted at Salthalls. "I hope the Dark Empress appreciates all my hard work against her enemies." He looked over his shoulder at the butler. "Think I could send her a bill for services rendered?"

Last edited: Feb 22, 2019

Moving In

Ami and Tiger were having breakfast together in a small chamber that overlooked the palace's courtyard. However, the dishes with eggs and poultry currently went ignored because the crystal ball resting on the table between the girls proved much more captivating.

Tiger had dressed sharp for the occasion and replaced her corruption-eroded Sailor Mercury uniform with something that showed off less of her black-striped skin. The combination of red loincloth, metal bikini, and assorted bits of shoulder and leg armour that formed the modified reaper outfit looked right at home on her muscular frame.

In contrast, Ami was still wearing her somewhat wrinkled pyjamas. The faces in the crystal ball were familiar enough that she didn't mind not looking her best.

Within the orb, Mrs. Mizuno was listening to Tiger with rapt attention, the cup of coffee in front of her forgotten. Without the red-tinted light of the rising sun falling in through the window, her face would have been pale as a sheet.

The adopted youma, in full control of the conversation despite Ami's half-hearted efforts, was currently updating their mother on the situation at Salthalls.

Ami listened with mixed feelings. While she wasn't exactly eager to confess to her mother that she had accidentally conquered a city, leaving the explanations to Tiger wasn't optimal either.

"…and she even got the Duke on our side by-" she glanced out of the window, at the crowd several floors below, and lowered her voice. "By doing something I'm not supposed to talk about in public. It involved both of them alone locked in a room for a few hours, though!"

Sailor Mars, sitting to the side of Mrs. Mizuno, choked on her tea.

"Tiger!" Ami shouted, feeling her cheeks heat up. "It's not what she makes it sound like!" she said in the direction of the crystal ball, waving her hands. "I only worked a metal that can't be shaped by evil people, which the troops mustn't know! That's all!"

Completely ignoring Ami's reproachful glare, Tiger pointed at the transformed dwarfs outside. "Anyway, that's why all of these guys are working for us now," she finished.

Mrs. Mizuno blinked, visibly at a loss for words, and turned towards Ami for confirmation.

Ami nodded. "Yes. It was an accident," she mumbled. "I promise we are going to turn them back to normal as soon as possible!"

Sailor Mars angled her head to get a better look at the youma assembled in the courtyard. "And there are really thousands of them?" she asked, her eyes wide.

"Up to forty thousand, according to Duke Libasheshtan," Ami replied. "We aren't sure how many people managed to flee before it was too late."

"This… this is all quite a lot to take in," her mother said. She looked straight into Ami's eyes and asked, "Are you really all right, Ami? You nearly died! Multiple times!"

"I'm fine, Mum," Ami hurried to assure her, "I was possessing a golem body, so nobody managed to hurt me."

"Still, I can't help but worry," Mrs. Mizuno sighed. "Even if you aren't injured, all of this stress still isn't good for you! For a moment, I almost didn't recognise you!"

The young Keeper managed to suppress a wince. She was still in Sailor Mercury form even though she wasn't wearing her uniform. Tiger had activated the crystal ball and then addressed her as Ami, shattering the identity-concealing effect of the transformation. "Ah, that- that's probably the lighting?" she suggested, pointing at her eyes. "With the red glow, my face looks different than what you are used to."

"I- I suppose so?" her mother replied, tilting her head to the side. "It's actually rather alarming, by the way. That glow can't be good for your eyes."

"She'll be fine, she spends most of her time in a golem body for safety anyway," Tiger came to her sister's aid. "Of course, she also abuses that ability to go without sleep for days."

"Ami…" Mrs. Mizuno said, sounding disappointed.

"I only do that when it's necessary!" Ami defended herself. "I take a break when I can afford to. In fact, I just had a good night's sleep."

"Did you sleep well? No nightmares?" her mother asked.

"None," Ami answered honestly, gently shaking her head. She had expected to spend the night tossing and turning, but apparently, safety and exhaustion ensured undisturbed slumber.

"Good. That's good, I think." Mrs. Mizuno paused. "At least I *hope* it is. I'm no psychologist, but after everything that happened, I feared…" she trailed off. "Are you absolutely sure you are feeling all right Ami?" She stared into her daughter's eyes as if trying to see into her mind.

"Actually," Tiger interjected as she waved a hand through the space between the crystal ball and Ami's face. "Things aren't as grim as they look at first glance."

Sailor Mars scowled. "Everyone in the city got turned into youma!"

"Yes, but that also means everyone became very resilient. It's hard to deal actually life-threatening injuries to a youma," Tiger replied.

Sailor Mars nodded. "Isn't that the truth," she grumbled under her breath, speaking from experience.

"You are saying that casualties were low despite all the chaos and infighting?" Mrs. Mizuno asked, sounding sceptical but cautiously optimistic. She hesitated, her eyes darting back to Ami for a moment. "Do you have some way to confirm that even without knowing exactly how many people are missing?"

Ami nodded slowly. "My imps are supposed to collect corpses they find. So far, they haven't retrieved anything larger than a rabbit," she said. "It's not complete certainty, but I'm taking it as a good sign," she continued, trying to sounding upbeat.

Sailor Mars looked indecisive for a moment, but then pressed on and asked, "What if the dead youma simply turned into dust?"

Ami shook her head. "None of our test animals did."

"I'm relieved to hear that the… the takeover was relatively bloodless," her mother said. "You already have so much to deal with. This is all a lot to take in."

"W-well, things are actually looking up, Mum," Ami said, trying to alleviate her parent's worries. "Despite everything, I may be safer right now than I have been at any point since arriving in this world. That means I can finally focus on fixing things. If everything goes according to plan, the dwarfs should be back to normal within one to three weeks," she said with a smile.

Sailor Mars leaned in closer, looking interested. "You already have a cure?"

"One derived from animated chicken soup!" Tiger said, grinning widely when the comment earned her confused looks from within the crystal ball and an annoyed groan from Ami.

"One step of the procedure involves transforming the patient into living liquid," the latter explained.

"What?" Sailor Mars shouted, staring at her incredulously.

Mrs. Mizuno simply stared with a puzzled look. "I'm not sure I heard correctly," she said.

Ami spent the next few minutes explaining why the liquefying, filtering, mind-restoring and exorcism steps were necessary and how they led to a cured dwarf.

When she finished, Mrs. Mizuno was massaging her temples. "I'll be the first to admit that magical healing is completely outside of my

area of expertise, but I have severe misgivings about just plucking pieces out of a body, even if they grow back."

"You can think of it as magical surgery, if it helps," Ami defended her method.

"I can see the similarities, Ami, and therefore I'm concerned about accidental brain surgery," her mother replied. "What happens when the malignant pieces you remove are part of the brain? There could be permanent damage to the patients' mental faculties."

Ami shuffled her feet. In a small voice, she answered, "We can't be certain, but we don't think that will happen. At least, we have strong evidence that, between youma magic and divine healing, it won't be an issue."

"That evidence is?" Mrs. Mizuno asked in a tone of voice she usually reserved for questioning ill-prepared trainees.

"Mengolin," Tiger answered before Ami could. "He's a mutated wizard who's more algae than dwarf. When he turns his head, the inside of his skull sloshes and rustles. No brain, still sane. Well, mostly sane."

"Actually, I sent him into a temple to get that fixed," Ami informed her sister. "She put both hands together as she continued, a little embarrassed. "Um, I assume it worked, because he's refusing to come back out and yelling about how I'm not going to deceive him again."

"Figures." Tiger shrugged and turned back to the crystal ball. "The important part is that he's thinking without a brain. His youma magic is compensating for the missing parts, somehow. Now, since corrupted parts of a transformed dwarf's brain are effectively useless, magic must have already taken over their function. Therefore, they can be safely removed."

Sailor Mars scratched her head, while Mrs. Mizuno was blinking rapidly with a blank look. After a few seconds, the adult woman sighed. "The more I learn about magic, the less I understand it. How does it do what it does? How does it even know what to do?"

Tiger shrugged again. "It just does. Not thinking too hard about it helps."

Mrs. Mizuno gave her a pained look. "That attitude offends my inner scientist."

"I know exactly how you feel, Mum," Ami commiserated.

"Yeah, she's absolutely terrible at working glamours on her own," Tiger confirmed smugly, "unlike her much more talented sister."

Ami swallowed a comment about the orange-skinned youma being very much an expert at not thinking things through. Instead, she said, "In any case, I have to trust Tiger's judgement here. I can't experiment on sapient beings."

"I agree completely," her mother said. "Perhaps you could start with curing only those people whose heads are clear of tumours? You might discover alternative options in the meantime."

"That's my plan," Ami said, nodding.

"Ami, there's one part I'm not getting," Sailor Mars said. "How do you plan to cure thousands in just a few weeks? If I understood you correctly, Jadeite needs about an hour to safely turn someone into a slime, and you can't manage the spell yourself."

"Oh, that," Ami said with a smile, relieved at being asked a question she could answer easily. A sheet of paper and a pencil appeared before her as she prepared to show off some math. "It's very simple actually, look here…"

Limul woke to the sight of two female faces staring down on him. He recognised Mengkun, the nervous-looking priestess from one of the local temples, but the human woman was unfamiliar to him. Strangely, it was Mengkun who was shivering when it was the human who looked as if she should feel cold. The long strands of black hair dangling down onto her chest did more to preserve her modesty than her barely-there outfit did.

He paused. Shouldn't he be embarrassed or outraged at the sight? The expected emotions stayed suspiciously absent, and so did the alarm that such a realization should entail.

"He's awake," the insufficiently covered human said, addressing someone he couldn't see. The priestess at her side glanced in the same direction and started shivering even harder.

He blinked. Instead of going black, his vision went blurry and red-tinged for a moment. That wasn't normal either. How had he ended up in this situation?

The human leaned forward and waved her black-gloved hand in front of his face.

Unimportant. The last thing he remembered was his Keeper-Empress casting a spell on him. He blinked again. Since when did he serve a Keeper, and why didn't he care that he did? He'd always thought of himself as a righteous, law-abiding dwarf.

The hand approached his face, prodding his skin with an index finger.

Oh, wait, he knew the answer to the first question. He had joined her a while after her dark magic had turned everyone into monsters, shortly after fighting his former comrades for control of the nourishment zones became unnecessary, but before he'd gotten bored and returned to his guard duties out of habit. In addition, every part of that recollection should have had him screaming in horror and revulsion, but somehow it didn't.

The digit stabbed through his cheek with a curious absence of pain. It started moving in a spiral pattern, making weird slurping noises.

At this point, he intellectually knew that he should be doing something about that. Yet, he simply didn't feel alarmed enough to bother.

"Monteraine, stop that," a young voice he recognised as belonging to the Empress said. "You are interfering with my scan."

The now identified human withdrew her finger from within his face. A

trail of reddish goo stuck to the digit, stretching out into a thin thread before it came loose and snapped back to his face. He was reminded of a spring snapping back into shape.

Monteraine turned to Mengkun. "He's completely senseless. Great job messing up a simple calming spell, midget!"

The white-clad priestess took a step back. "I-I did not! I made it as strong as I could!"

Oh, so he wasn't feeling anything because of an emotion-suppressing spell. That made sense. He could definitely understand why they thought he could use one of those.

"Perhaps that's the problem?" Empress Mercury said from somewhere behind him.

Upon hearing her voice, the priestess flinched and let out a whimper through chattering teeth.

The Empress sighed. "Perhaps you could use that calming spell on yourself, Sister Mengkun?" she suggested. "Not at full power, mind you."

"Do as she says," Duke Libasheshtan's voice came from the same direction. Why was a noble like him present and apparently cooperating with the Dark Empress? Why was the priestess still complying with his orders despite this obvious corruption? As a servant of the Light, she should be holding herself to a higher standard.

"We still need to get the patient ready to talk to us," Mercury said.

Monteraine stopped waving her fingers in front of Mengkun's face, earning herself a frown from the no longer shaking priestess. "Very well, time to put him back to sleep before I cancel the current enchantment," the sorceress said. Thimbles of purplish light formed around her fingers as she pointed her hand in his direction.

Dread wasn't an emotion Limul could feel right now. If he could, he would have felt motivated to dodge the thin purple ray that cancelled the spell preventing him from becoming upset.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" The patient sat up from the bed so fast that his liquid upper body whipped forward, elongating and thinning as the momentum stretched it.

Ami started in surprise, having expected a more muted reaction. It seemed as if Sister Mengkun had gone too easy on the calming spell this time. She lowered her head in sympathy. Still, she would count herself lucky if that remained the greatest problem with the curing procedure. With practice, the priestess would eventually get it right.

She also figured that the spell was at least partially working. The patient, called Limul according to the priestess, was hugging his knees and curling up into a quivering ball. It was far from optimal, but still much better than panicked flailing about with stretchy, whip-like limbs.

"NO! NO! NOOOO! LIGHT, WHY?" the liquid youma yelled between pitiful sobs. "I'M A MONSTER!"

"Soldier, pull yourself together!" Duke Libasheshtan barked in a voice used to command. "Your behaviour is unbecoming of a member of the Guard!"

On reflex, Limul jumped to attention with a picture-perfect salute. It was fortunate that the bed sheet covering his body adhered to his liquid skin, as putting clothes on a slime had proved impossible. He stood still for a moment, but then his right eye started twitching when he noticed that the fingers of his balled fist were merging into a single whole.

"My existence is unbecoming of a member of Guard!" he howled as he sat down on the bed with a defeated moan, head and shoulders hanging. "I'm no longer a dwarf! I'm an abomination! Worse, I'm a Keeper minion!"

"Um, at least turning you back into a dwarf can be done in an instant," Ami spoke up, wringing her hands guiltily.

Slowly, the liquid youma turned his head in her direction, as if scared of what he would find. His entire body went rigid when he confirmed that yes, the Dark Empress was in the room and yes, she was looking straight at him. His eyes went wide, far wider than they could have if his body was solid, until they looked as if they would fall from his skull.

"E-E-Empress," he finally managed to choke out, falling over as he tried to simultaneously bow and drop to his knees."

"Please, get up," she said in a friendly voice when it looked as if he would remain sprawled out on the floor, resembling a half melted wax figure. "I do apologise for the inconveniences," she added. "You are the first dwarf we are trying to turn back to normal, and the procedure still has some flaws."

In the back of the room, Sister Mengkun tried to shuffle farther out of Ami's line of sight unnoticed.

"Y-your Imperial M-Majesty?" Limul asked as he looked up at her in surprise before hurriedly lowering his gaze.

"You were supposed to wake up calm enough to read all the explanations we prepared in advance," she gestured at a small pamphlet lying untouched on the nightstand. "Ideally, you would have known that you are going to be turned back to normal before you could worry about your current fluid state. It's just a necessary step before you can be transformed back into a regular dwarf. I intend to cure everyone in Salthalls eventually."

The transformed dwarf, still kneeling, swallowed as he looked at his hands. His arms were drooping like wet noodles, arching at the elbows. "T-Truly? This is reversible?" he whispered, his face vacillating between disbelief and hope.

Ami smiled. "At this point, all it takes is a simple exorcism."

His eyes darted over to the priestess for an instant before his gaze locked onto Ami's boots again. "C-could you…?"

"Just one moment, please. I'll need your help curing the other dwarfs

too," she said.

"Mine?" Limul answered, his shoulders straightening. "But I'm a simple soldier, not a mage. How could I possibly help?"

"Right now, you are a type of creature called a 'youma'," Ami told him. "That means you have a natural affinity for the kind of magic required." She telekinetically moved the pamphlet over to him. "Please read page two, which explains the necessity of the liquid phase."

Limul flinched as the levitating paper touched his hand but started reading as instructed. After a while, he lowered the pamphlet and said "Your Imperial Majesty? If I understand this correctly, the liquid transformation is required to remove corrupted flesh that would kill the victim during the exorcism?"

Ami nodded enthusiastically. "Exactly! However, I currently have exactly one person who can turn patients into liquid youma, and he can only manage around ten of them a day. As a youma, you have the potential to learn the technique, too."

Limul's shoulders slumped in resignation. "A-as a youma. You want me to stay like this. V-very well, if that is the price for being cured eventually..."

"It's not a price," she replied, waving her hands defensively. "If you refuse or turn out to not have the required talent, you will be restored back to normal immediately. It's delicate magic, someone coerced into assisting couldn't be trusted to help anyways."

Duke Libasheshtan took a step forward. "It is, however, only a minor inconvenience. Consider this: if only two out of every ten people cured can help cure more people, then we can already cure thirty people tomorrow. If, again, six out of those thirty people have the talent, then we can cure ninety people the day after. Two-hundred and seventy the day after. Over eight-hundred the next. After a little more than a week, every citizen of Salthalls could be back to normal. Will you delay your own cure for less than a fortnight to help your people, soldier?"

Limul's stance shifted the moment he made his decision. His spine straightened, making his slouch disappear, and he raised his head as he saluted. "I will serve, your Grace! It is a small sacrifice on the way to restoring what's left of my honour!"

"Great!" Ami clapped her hands together happily. "Prepare yourself; I will transport you straight to your new teacher, General Jadeite. And keep the pamphlet, it will answer most of your questions about living arrangements."

The moment Limul looked from Duke Libasheshtan back at Ami, his newly gained confidence fled him. "Y-yes, your Imperial Majesty," he replied with a shudder that made most of his jelly-like body wobble.

She transported him to his new destination and addressed her other assistants. "Monteraine, Sister Mengkun, go prepare the next patient, please."

The priestess bowed repeatedly in Ami's direction as she fled backwards towards the exit, almost bumping into the smirking Monteraine in the process.

"That could have gone better," Ami commented, looking at the empty bed. "Still, it wasn't too bad for a first attempt. Thanks for convincing him to cooperate."

The Duke frowned. "You do remember that we do not have enough priests to perform exorcisms on hundreds or thousands of victims a day, right? It feels distasteful to deceive him about the expected length of his service."

"Being unable to immediately complete the final step won't stop us from slimifying everyone," she contradicted. "In fact, building up a backlog of exorcism-ready liquid youma could be beneficial."

The dwarven noble crossed his arms. "Is this going to be part of one of those convoluted plans you are famous for?" he asked.

"No, I'm simply hoping that it will be politically unfeasible for your countrymen to reject a plea to let victims be restored at their temples. Which would require them to open communications to

discuss the details with me," she explained with a satisfied smile.

"Does that mean I can skip the regularly scheduled fruitless attempts until then?" the Duke asked, his expression brightening.

"No, but you can already tempt them into talking with the prospect of saving the citizens of Salthalls in the near future," she replied, looking apologetic.

"I'm sure the part about turning everyone into slimes will make them take me more seriously," he grumbled.

Duke Libasheshtan withdrew the arm he had wrapped around Umbra's waist, splitting up the inky shape formed by their combined silhouettes. Still disoriented by the teleport, the dwarf took a stumbling step away from the taller youma.

Ami looked up from her computer's display and down the table lined with empty chairs. As she watched, shadows peeled themselves off her two visitors and dissolved on the floor tiles.

"Empress," Umbra said, inclining her masked and hooded head in greeting.

The Duke squinted, blinking rapidly to adapt his vision to the sudden brightness. Luminous crystal squares shone at him from all of the chalk-white walls, seamlessly integrated into the room's geometrical engravings. After a moment, he managed to spot Ami at the other end of the room, and he turned to face her. "Your Imperial Majesty," he greeted as he bowed.

"Duke Libasheshtan," she acknowledged as she rose from of her chair to return his bow.

He froze for a split-second, his gaze lowering and the corners of his mouth twitching downwards briefly before returning to a neutral expression.

Following his gaze, she quickly identified the issue. While standing, a small section of bare skin had become visible between the gold-

rimmed hem of her dress and the surface of the table. While the black garment felt as if it had shrunk a size, it was still at least as long as her senshi uniform's skirt.

Nevertheless, she sat back down quickly, sinking into her seat's thick padding. The dress wasn't particularly scandalous by her own standards, but she still felt her cheeks heat up due to the dwarf's disapproval. So much for making a professional, dignified impression despite the corruption effects eroding her wardrobe.

Avoiding the Duke's gaze, she focused on Umbra's masked and hooded face instead. "Umbra, you may leave until the Duke has need of transport again."

The youma nodded and disappeared in an expanding wave of shadows that briefly made the lights flicker.

Walking across the impeccably clean floor tiles, Duke Libasheshtan approached the table.

"How did it go?" Ami asked him expectantly, shifting on her chair. Proportioned for a dwarf, it was too wide for her. Even with the fabric of her cloak bunching up over its armrests, she didn't manage to fill up enough space and resembled a small child sitting on an adult's seat.

The Duke's lips tightened in annoyance. "Poorly. I'm afraid you won't be talking to any dwarven diplomats today," he replied, briefly glancing at the inactive crystal ball to the right of her computer. Less utilitarian than regular models, it rested on a silver pedestal with decorative carvings and tiny embedded gems.

Ami's eager anticipation turned to disappointment, which she was unable to out of her voice. "Really? I admit I was expecting better news after you remained in the temple for so long."

The Duke pulled out the chair closest to her left. "Don't remind me," he grumbled. "So much time wasted talking to clerks who go on and on without saying anything of consequence." Shaking his head, he let himself drop into his seat. "Do you mind?" he asked, gesturing towards the tablet with silver goblets and a bottle, which, according

to him, were a traditional staple of dwarven negotiations.

Ami pushed it closer to him, not seeing a reason to worsen his mood.

"As I said, I wasn't able to contact anybody important," the black-bearded dwarf continued as he poured himself a drink. He looked at Ami the whole time his hands moved, but somehow didn't spill a single drop. "I assume there are orders to keep me from interacting with anyone in a position of power. And also to encourage me subtly," he rolled his eyes, "to find the nearest hero gate and escape."

"That's unfortunate." Ami lowered her head, frowning at her reflection in the table's glass-sheathed wooden surface. Sighing, she reached up to her forehead to remove the weighty crown-like tiara she had put on in preparation for a diplomatic meeting.

A surprised choking noise came from the Duke's direction. Cross-eyed, he stared into his goblet for a moment before tilting his head to the side and meeting her gaze. "Grape juice?" he asked in an incredulous voice. His perplexed expression urged her to explain herself.

She sank a little deeper into her seat. "I'm too young to drink. Even if I wasn't, I would try to keep my head clear until I was off-duty," she said quickly. "Anyway, I was really expecting that there would be progress with everything we are doing and with a Duke arguing in my favour."

The noble in question shrugged. "Your mistake is assuming that my title would exempt me from the laws about not negotiating with Keepers or their servants. In fact, I have to choose my words very carefully to avoid giving the impression that I am working for you."

Ami steadied her elbows on the table and rested her head on her hands. "Your laws are irritating. I can't negotiate with the King personally. I can't order anyone to negotiate on my behalf either," she summarised her dilemma.

"They are meant to prevent non-violent interaction with Keepers,"

the Duke pointed out.

Ami narrowed her eyes at him. "That's- that's just…" She groaned in frustration. "Do I really have to conquer the entire kingdom just to make peace?"

Paling, the Duke sat up straighter. "Please don't," he said in a flat voice.

"Don't worry, I wasn't serious," she assured the alarmed dwarf, making him relax fractionally. "Why would anyone think those laws were a good idea in the first place?" she asked tiredly.

Duke Libasheshtan cleared his throat. "Well, it made sense in context," he said. "Not listening to Keeper Bartholomeus would have avoided a civil war and a third of our nobles going into exile in disgrace." His teeth clenched and he looked down, his gaze unfocused.

She paused while he relived unpleasant memories, pondering. Quickly, she made the connection between the poorly regarded dwarfs in Sirith Anlur who couldn't work adamantine and the disgraced exiles. It figured that the only dwarfs she could potentially convince to exert political pressure on her behalf didn't have any influence worth mentioning. "Is there really nothing that could convince King Ral that I have peaceful intentions?" she asked after a moment.

The Duke stopped brooding and hesitated for only a moment. "Short of digging up the adamantine prison, putting it on a train, and sending it to him? No. I doubt there's anything aside from inspecting the damage himself that could make him reconsider his stance."

"Tempting, but it would get me killed," she replied. "Too many people would handle it to preserve the secret about my true allegiance."

"Your minions," the Duke said, "how much do they know about adamantine? Could you not pretend that you broke through under your own power?"

Ami briefly considered the most likely outcome. "I'm sure some of the dark gods would gleefully set them straight. Though, with my luck, I wouldn't be surprised if King Ral believed me."

Duke Libasheshtan didn't smile at her attempt at levity. Instead, he slowly looked her up and down, stroking his beard as he let out a drawn-out humming noise. Just as she was getting uncomfortable under his measuring gaze, he started muttering, "Perhaps… yes, with your Empress title…"

"You have a new idea?" she asked, perking up.

"Yes. I believe it's workable, but I will have to refresh my memory on family and succession laws relating to foreign nobility before I can be certain."

"Why would you-" She gasped as she made the connection, and her skin tingled.

To get around her diplomatic obstacles, she needed someone who didn't work for her and wasn't her subject, but who could still negotiate in her name…

Cheeks burning, she jumped to her feet. "I- I'm not marrying anyone!"

Reluctant Overtures

"Jered, this is serious," Cathy drawled, frowning at her boyfriend. Her arm twitched, but his ribcage was sadly not in elbowing reach even though he was sitting right next to her.

The wavy-haired man was bending forward so much that his forehead touched the top of the same table he was slapping with his right hand, chuckling to himself. "I'm just imagining their faces when Mercury drops that bit of news on them," he said and promptly dissolved into another round of chuckles.

Ami, seated across from him, felt her cheeks starting to heat up. "I'm not seeing what's so absurd about the notion," she stated, pulling her arms closer to her chest.

"It's, well, it's unprecedented, at least," Cathy said. "I'm assuming the Duke," her eyes flicked over to an empty chair briefly, "knows what he's talking about, so I'm not saying it's impossible, but, given your situation, it sounds like it should be."

"It's not like it costs me anything to try," Ami replied.

"That's not exactly correct," Jered objected. He rose to an upright position, his grin fading into a more business-like expression. "You may want to start thinking in terms of political capital," he said. "While the Avatar might only be a little annoyed at your request for wasting his time if Duke Libasheshtan fails to convince him, you'll definitely owe him a favour if he goes along with your plan."

Ami nodded, accepting his point.

"More importantly though," Cathy said, "what's going to stop the dwarfs from continuing to ignore you? It's not like they'll want to talk to you just because it's no longer legally impossible."

Ami smiled. "Well, I'm hoping to make them believe that this will annoy me more than them."

"… one saving grace is that trains can't turn quickly, which helps us by keeping the required density of the detection grid lower than their size would suggest," Duke Uzolgim said, adjusting his spectacles.

"Low enough to afford it?" Duke Cattenor asked while he continued frowning at the papers before him.

Duke Uzolgim hesitated. "If we prioritize it over everything else, yes," he offered cautiously.

"That's a 'no' then," Cattenor sighed.

"We can't not do anything about it!" Duke Alnisalath said loudly. "Troops moving undetected underground is a nightmare already; mobile dungeon hearts are so much worse!"

"Which is why we are scrying on the individual trains as a workaround," Countess Lalimush said. "As long as we don't miss any new ones she builds, it's even somewhat workable."

"And ties up wizards that would be much more useful keeping an eye on the other Keepers," Duke Cattenor sighed. He looked up from his calculations for the first time. "Do we actually have any indications that Keeper Mercury is planning another attack in the near future?"

"Her building up an army of fluid monsters that would be perfect for slipping through our underground defences is a pretty strong hint," Duke Omerreg pointed out.

"Can't shift too many resources then," Cattenor agreed with a pained nod.

King Ral lamented that this strategy meeting was shaping up to prove just as fruitless as the ones that came before it. From his place of honour at the head of the table, he swept his gaze over the long faces of the Dukes and Duchesses sitting with him.

So far, the collected nobles were proving themselves much better at emptying wine bottles than at coming up with viable plans. Looking down at his own blank list of suggestions, he forcibly fought down

the urge to order a drink with a little more kick.

"Sire?" Someone called out in a low voice.

The elderly king turned his head towards the hooded wizard approaching him with a glowing crystal ball. Unexpected calls weren't uncommon in times of war, but they usually meant dreadful news. "Put it over there," King Ral sighed, pointing at a spot where the tablecloth was relatively free of maps and papers.

"At once, Sire," the robed mage confirmed.

"Am I calling at a bad time?" the voice from the crystal ball asked barely a moment after the device had come to a rest.

"Lord Avatar!" King Ral's posture straightened when he recognised the red-bearded face in the orb, his morose mood brightening. "Have you reconsidered? Are you going to assist us in this dark hour, after all?"

Around the table, the nobles leaned in closer, more attentive than they had been since the beginning of the meeting.

The Avatar raised an eyebrow. "If you are referring to Empress Mercury, then yes," he said, nodding slowly. "However!" he added, pre-empting premature cheers, "My assistance will take a more indirect form than you are probably expecting."

King Ral closed his mouth, his momentary elation dampened. "Any and all help will be warmly welcomed," he said after a moment, "Though I find myself curious about what you mean with 'indirect assistance'."

"It's very simple," the Avatar said. "King Ral, Duchesses Ducimezar and Lalimush, Dukes Omerreg, Uzolgim, Cattenor and Alnisalath," he nodded briefly in the direction of each of the nobles as he said their name. Now having their undivided attention, he proclaimed, "I am hereby officially appointing Duke Libasheshtan as Empress Mercury's regent."

King Ral felt his jaw fall open as he forgot to breathe for a moment. Stupefied, he stared at the crystal ball.

Not all of his council took the announcement as quietly. Amidst gasps and the sound of Duke Omerreg ripping one of his notes in two, there were shouts.

"WHAT?" Duke Alnisalath had shot to his feet so quickly that his chair fell over and made a muffled thudding noise on the thick carpet.

"HAVE YOU LOST YOUR MIND?" Duchess Ducimezar asked, quick as always to make her displeasure known.

"I am quite sane, I assure you," the Avatar replied cheerfully, looking unperturbed.

King Ral felt his own ire rise. What was Amadeus thinking, raising their hopes only to dash them? Was this some kind of sick joke? Worse, if he were serious then he'd be adding legitimacy to that Keeper's title!

"You can't do that," King Ral heard himself say.

"Underage; no liege; no vassals; no suitable family members," the Avatar listed calmly, raising one finger with each point. "I most certainly can appoint an appropriate guardian in situation like those, rare as they may be."

"That's not-" King Ral began, but thought better of it. "All questions of appropriateness and authority aside, why would you do that?"

"Simple. If Mercury likes to play at being an Empress, then why should we spare her the inconveniences and obligations that come with such a title?"

"Because it would mean treating her like a legitimate noble!" Duke Alnisalath said with a scowl.

"Which is preposterous," the King agreed. "She is a Keeper."

The Avatar shrugged and let his gaze linger briefly on the empty suggestion sheets on the table. "I take it that you have a better option for making her life difficult, then? Or any at all?"

The resulting silence was answer enough.

"There you go then," the Avatar continued. "I gave you a tool to put pressure on her where you had none before."

King Ral forced down his anger enough to give the idea some serious consideration. His expression soured. "This plan of yours puts Duke Libasheshtan in a great amount of danger for nebulous benefits," he said. "You are putting him in a position where he has to intentionally irritate and annoy the powerful Keeper who is holding him captive."

"I doubt giving him some actual power, even if it's dependent on Mercury's willingness to play along, will increase the danger he's in," the Avatar said. "She apparently wants to be taken seriously as an empress, which means that she has to at least keep up the appearance of sticking to the rules."

"I do like the idea of forcing her to expose her rule as the sham it is," Duke Omerreg said, nodding along thoughtfully.

"Oh, can we have Thol just ground the brat until she's of age?" Duchess Lalimush suggested with an eager grin.

The Avatar's face in the crystal ball turned to shoot her a flat look. "I expect you would be disappointed by the results. She's more than happy to stay with her books unless forced into action, as I have repeatedly pointed out before."

King Ral snorted. The day he started to believe that the Dark Empress had an elaborate city conquest plan just lying around with no intention to use it was the day he'd abdicate due to senility. Unwilling to rehash the point, he asked instead, "Lord Avatar, why select Duke Libasheshtan for this role? Why the captive Duke of a nation she is at war with, rather than someone safer from her retribution?"

"Two reasons. The first is Salthalls. It's the only one of Mercury's current holdings that requires administration, and there's nobody more qualified for the job than him. He'll be in the best possible position to minimize further damage to the city and its inhabitants.

The second reason is that it actually improves his safety."

"Please elaborate," King Ral prompted, his words sounding more sceptical than he intended to reveal.

"It turns him into an irreplaceable asset for Mercury. Someone who can make deals on behalf of her Empire without working directly for her. As the only available liaison with you, she'll also have no choice about letting him regularly visit temples to stay in contact and prove that he remains uncompromised."

King Ral frowned. The explanation made a twisted kind of sense, even if it offended his sensibilities. With a deep sigh, he nodded once. "I hate it, but it seems at least like a feasible course of action. Duke Cattenor, what's your take on this?"

The Duke stopped leafing through his sheets. "I'm sure I can think of a few ways to hamper her war effort by keeping her busy with keeping up appearances," he said, baring his teeth in a vicious grin.

"You seem to have things well in hand," the Avatar commented. "Very well then. Please inform the Duke of his promotion at your earliest convenience." He inclined his head briefly before his crystal ball went blank.

King Ral stroked his bushy white beard as he shifted to sit more comfortably and considered the… surprise… the Avatar had just ambushed them with. "So," he said, dragging out the word, "what do you think? Are we better off pretending this never happened?"

The various nobles were quiet, unsure if he was jesting. He wasn't really sure himself. Finally, Duke Omerreg spoke up "Distasteful as the concept may be, I think it offers opportunities to gain intelligence on the Dark Empress' intentions. Tell me what you think of this plan..."

Gleaming forks, knives and spoons formed an elaborate arrangement around Ami's plate. With some hesitation, she selected one of the more silvery-looking spoons and prepared to crack the

cooked egg open.

"Close, but incorrect, your Imperial Majesty" Duke Libasheshtan interrupted with a stern look. He was seated to her right, directly across from Tiger to her left. "The egg-breaking ladle is the one over there."

"Why are we doing this again?" Her adopted sister asked. Tiger's slouched posture gained her another stern look from the Duke, which she ignored. Like Ami and the other women at the long table, she was wearing the dwarven version of a long evening dress. Imps positioned strategically around the room with the sole task of watching the diners prevented corruption-induced alterations in an unobserved moment.

"Because making sure that her Majesty or her sister don't embarrass themselves by being ignorant of proper etiquette is part of my duties now," the black-bearded dwarf replied, sounding resigned.

"And we just happen to be collateral damage?" Cathy asked. The swordswoman sat further down the table, across from Jered. Despite her words, she seemed to be actually enjoying the atmosphere.

"You are some of the more presentable members of her Majesty's forces, and thus may be required to appear at public functions. It would, therefore, be wasteful not to have you sit in on these lessons," Duke Libasheshtan explained.

Ami glanced up at the figures sitting past Snyder and Torian. Her gaze briefly lingered on Jadeite, who looked quite dashing in the dwarven style formal shirt and vest. Snyder, wearing something similar, appeared less comfortable without his acolyte robes. No, never mind, that seemed to be Venna's fault. If the Duke could see under the table what the dark elf was doing to the redhead with her foot, he would certainly have reprimanded her.

Further down the table, Torian was the only one who had forgone the dwarf-inspired formal style. The head warlock had opted for stiff black robes with wide silver trim instead, proudly displaying his mastery symbols on the opulent cloth. He visibly perked up at the

mention of possible promotions.

Unlike him, the warlocks and dark elves she was less familiar with sat stiffly in their seats, their expressions rigid. Some of their pasty faces gleamed with sweat. Only the youma Landra provided a dash of green colour among the general pallor.

Ami could understand their unease to a degree. The prospect of more prominent positions didn't exactly balance out her own presence. Nobody wanted to mess up in front of the boss, especially when said boss was an Empress and worse, a Keeper.

Perhaps they would feel more comfortable if she gave them more context on what was going on? "I certainly wasn't expecting the dwarfs' first demand to be a gala to publicly announce your new position as Regent of my empire," she told the Duke.

"They are testing the waters," the dwarf replied. "That's why they are asking for a relatively tiny concession that's still inconvenient and will waste your time."

"Wanting to laugh at her for being an ill-mannered peasant unfamiliar with the etiquette doesn't factor into it at all, I'm sure," Cathy commented, apparently unconcerned that her grip on her wine glass was not perfectly traditional.

"We should just make our own," Tiger moaned. "Etiquette I mean. Our empire doesn't have an established tradition yet, so whatever the Empress says goes, right? She'd define what was appropriate and formal, even if it was something involving racy-"

"Tiger, no!" Ami interrupted quickly, shaking her head.

"That's quite enough, your Highness," Duke Libasheshtan said. "The idea is to not offend the other party. Besides, as the acting Regent, it would still be up to me to set the empire's standards."

The striped youma narrowed her eyes at him but didn't protest.

"Your Majesty, if I may?" Torian broke the momentary silence. "This seems like as good an opportunity as any to clarify a point I am confused about. What does the chain of command looks like now

that it includes Duke Libasheshtan? Are we supposed to take orders from him, or..." he trailed off, looking rather dubious about the arrangement.

Some of the other employees at leaned in closer in interest.

"You continue to take your orders directly from me," Ami answered. There was no way she would allow her enemies that much influence over her armed forces. "Technically speaking, all of you are my mercenaries and not citizens or soldiers of my empire. As such, he has no direct authority over you."

Torian nodded, and so did some of the people seated farther away. "I see. Thank you for answering my question to my fullest satisfaction, your Majesty." He directed a smug smile in the Duke's direction.

"However," Ami continued, "You will have to keep in mind that he is also in charge of upholding the laws of the empire, so if you broke them, he would be within his rights to have you dealt with accordingly."

The warlock raised an eyebrow. "I assume those situations are purely hypothetical as we don't have an official code of law yet?"

She paused for a moment, considering. "For now. That's not a sustainable state though. There will need to be clear rules when more and more of the locals return to sanity."

"They will be used to the previous laws, your Imperial Majesty," Duke Libasheshtan pointed out. "It would cause the least disruption to simply carry them over, with adequate adaptations for your particular situation, of course."

"It would be a lot of work to ensure no loopholes that could be used against me remain," Ami noted. "Slow, painstaking work." She winced when another thought struck her. "The dwarfs will be pushing for this, won't they?"

Jered nodded. "Yep. Citing rule of law as a prerequisite for diplomatic deals to stall any progress while still appearing

reasonable sounds like just the kind of thing they would do."

Ami sighed. "Right. I will-" she stopped and turned to the dwarf sitting to her right. "Or rather, Duke Libasheshtan will have to hire some professionals to work out the details on behalf of the empire."

"You want to trust lawyers with this?" the Duke asked, sounding bemused. "I suppose that's feasible, with sufficient supervision. I can contact a few reliable ones when I go prepare the gala."

"In your southern holdings, right." Jered said. No diplomats wanted to visit Salthalls for obvious reasons. "I'll need the exact location and timetable as soon as you have made the arrangements so I can make some of my own."

"Additional security?" the Duke asked. "I hardly see a reason for that. Who in their right mind would want to get into a fight with the Empress after recent events?"

"You misunderstand," Jered waved his hand. "I simply intend to make sure that the event will receive sufficient public attention. It would be unfortunate if the dwarfs decided that things with the regency weren't going the way they liked, and therefore pretended that it never happened."

Duke Libasheshtan blinked, but didn't deny that the possibility existed. "Fine, but that will raise expectations. The absence of the fairy ambassador in anything but pristine condition would raise concerns about the safety of future diplomats, for example."

Ami leaned forward. "Torian, I told you a while ago to search for the fairy sisters?"

"Indeed you did," the head warlock confirmed. "I am aware of their location and foresee no notable difficulties in collecting them." His toothy smile wavered a little. "Though there is something a little odd going on with one of them."

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Odd Discoveries

Torian had claimed a corner of the palace's library as his office. His desk stood hidden in the shadow of a bookshelf that touched the ceiling, and he had even hung a dividing curtain to dim the light further. The twilight wasn't ideal for reading or working, but it did make the images within his crystal ball easier to see.

Seated in his looming chair, the warlock waved pale fingers over the glowing orb as he zoomed in on a particularly fluffy and plump youma. "And the fuzzball menace to carpets everywhere over there is the Ambassador."

Ami, seated across from him, nodded. Using the image in the scrying device as a reference, she sought out the transformed fairy with her Keeper sight for a closer look. With two fur-covered wings emerging from beneath her long, blonde mane like floppy ears, she reminded Ami of a well-fed rabbit. The young Keeper briefly pondered running her fingers through the soft, inviting-looking fur, and then sighed. Not only would doing so be inappropriate, it would also be completely mortifying if Camilla remembered it once cured.

When she focused on Torian again, he seemed to be studying her face with a knowing look. "Be advised that the fluff she sheds paralyzes on touch," he said.

"R-Right, I'll warn Jadeite," she said quickly and faced away from him, mildly embarrassed. Like the overwhelming majority of the new youma, Camilla had a minion link, which was likely to cause both her and Ami a lot of trouble in the future. In the meantime, it meant that transporting her into one of the waiting rooms for the high-priority patients took only a moment of concentration. Scribbling a warning on the door with a telekinetically controlled piece of chalk didn't take much longer.

As soon as the fairy disappeared from Torian's view, he started waving his fingers over the crystal ball again. "Ah, here we go, your Majesty. Our healers will need a larger tub for that one."

Ami focused on the amethyst-coloured figure visible in the orb. Crystalline carapace formed an exoskeleton around a female figure who towered over the surrounding youma as she walked in a hunched position, her head scraping against the ceiling. Her right arm was much larger and thicker than the left, easily reaching the ground.

"That one can change her size, fully or in part," Torian explained. "Your Majesty, I recommend putting her in a sealed room with sturdy walls, because she can shrink down and squeeze through any small gap."

"Indeed?" Ami had a better idea and transported the mutated fairy into a regular jail cell with a barred door instead.

The confused youma turned her head to look at her new surroundings for a moment before walking towards the bars, losing height with every step.

Ami hit her with a sleeping spell when she was about the size of a doll. The healers would be grateful for not having to haul around a creature that, in her estimation, weighed about as much as a fully-grown cow.

"The next one makes me a little dizzy," Torian confessed.

It took Ami a split-second to notice that his crystal ball wasn't showing an empty corridor. There was one spot where the brickwork distorted and curved. She squinted, trying to make sense of the strange way light and shadows failed to outline contours properly.

A quick inspection with Keeper sight revealed that she was looking at a purely optical phenomenon, rather than some patch of twisted space. A faceless youma with smooth, reflective skin sat in the exact centre of an equally reflective disc-shaped patch of ground.

"She's surrounded by a field that makes every surface inside act like a mirror," Torian elaborated. "It doesn't seem to interfere with friction, but everyone inside is blind until-"

Ami jerked upright, prompting the warlock to stop talking and look at

her in surprise. She held up her palm, signalling him to wait for a moment while she investigated the sudden alert she had received from her dungeon.

Some of her underlings were fighting. Given their nature, brawls and violence weren't uncommon, but this time, she sensed that someone without a minion link was involved.

She willed her Keeper Sight towards the source of the alert, and it jumped to a district of the city she hadn't personally visited yet. She found herself looking at a corridor junction where three residential alleys merged into a larger shopping district.

On the ground, three prone trolls flailed around in an oily bluish puddle. A fourth held onto a tall statue, his green arms wrapped around its waist. Sculpted granite armour pressed uncomfortably into his skin as he tried to remain upright, his kicking feet failing to find purchase on the stained cobblestones.

A bit ahead of the slippery puddle, the leader of the team was lying on his back, a footprint-shaped bruise on his face slowly turning a deeper shade of green.

The culprits hadn't gotten far yet. A blur consisting of two female figures was racing down the street. The youma in the lead had yellowed, wrinkled skin and obviously some kind of speed-related magic. Her partner in crime trailed behind her like a banner fluttering in the wind, one elongated, stretchy arm trapped in the faster youma's grip.

"Don't let them get you!" the former yelled. "They are melting people into goo!"

Ami suddenly flinched as a façade covered in figurine-holding alcoves entered her field of view. With her Keeper Sight, it felt like the equivalent of the sun suddenly shining into her eyes without warning. She was looking at holy ground.

The sensation was more startling than unpleasant, but it distracted her long enough for the door to slam shut behind the two fleeing youma.

Opening her eyes, Ami lowered her arm. "The team supposed to retrieve the first two fairies failed. They have taken refuge in a small shrine." She could detect a minion link to the rubbery youma, but her sane sister's grip on her arm prevented Ami from just transporting the "prisoner" away.

"I'm sure a number of bored minions would be happy to drag them back out for you," Torian suggested with an eager grin.

"Better to just send their sisters once they are cured," Ami replied absently while she telekinetically pushed the fallen trolls onto less slippery terrain. Looking at Torian she asked, "Who's next?"

The scrying orb fogged up briefly underneath the warlock's touch before it focused on the next fairy.

Ami's eyebrows rose. "I thought you wanted to keep the odd one for last?"

She was looking at an emaciated being with enough branching limbs to look like a cross between a skeleton, a spider, and a leafless bush. Series of holes ran down the thin, bone-coloured appendages, giving them a flute-like appearance.

Ami shifted uncomfortably when she noted that similar holes in the youma's forehead let her see right into the bald skull. It seemed to be as hollow as the rest of the limbs. She wondered how the mutated fairy was even alive, though her functional minion link left no doubt that she was.

Torian looked up at her and blinked. "That isn't the oddity," he said in a surprised tone.

Ami was dreading to learn what the warlock considered odd if he took that kind of weirdness in stride. Wait, no, she had seen six mutated fairies so far, so the last could only be the dragon-like one she had briefly encountered in the casting chamber.

"All right." Ami took a deep breath and considered the flailing flute-spider thing again. "I think we better hold off on trying to heal that one before we are completely confident that the slime method will

work on her."

"Very well, your Majesty." Torian made his crystal ball change perspective again. "On to the one I figured you might take a personal interest in."

The image in the sphere changed to show a treasure chamber with the chequered floor common to those constructed by Ami. It was otherwise unremarkable, aside from not containing any treasure.

Ami didn't need to verify its coordinates to recognise it as the treasury she had created near her railway station to temporarily stash the wealth arriving by train from her abandoned Whitemountain dungeon.

Right now, the room should have been empty. Instead, it contained a crowd of youma and a large, snoring dragon, who had curled up like a dog sleeping in its basket. Aside from the dragon, everyone was looking at the red-scaled figure resting in the crook formed by the dragon's body as if it was her own personal armchair.

Blinking, Ami took a closer look at the transformed fairy leaning her back against the fire-breathing lizard's flank and using his tail as a footrest. Had she sought ought dragons when reminded of her siblings? It made a little sense, but it didn't even begin to explain what Ami was looking at here.

There were several things wrong with the situation, and not just because dragons generally didn't cuddle or sleep in empty treasuries. Youma shuffling towards the fairy in a small procession to offer their hard-won shards of crystallised black mana as tribute went against everything Ami knew about their behaviour.

An imp joining them with her own contribution for the pile pushed the situation from strange to outright alarming.

"You were right to bring this to my attention," Ami said, instinctively lowering her voice as if the creatures in the treasury could overhear her.

Torian lowered his head in a shallow bow, a self-satisfied smile on

his face. "Glad I could be of service, your Majesty."

Ami nodded absently as she considered the situation. The transformed fairy, whom she tentatively assumed to be Anise due to her red colour, had gained a minion link since she met her, most likely when Salthalls had become Ami's territory. While diplomatically problematic, it was good news in this particular situation. Someone outside of the dungeon's chain of command being able to influence her imps to such a degree could be disastrous.

Wanting to see how much her control over the imp was compromised, she ordered the crystal-carrying worker to leave.

Without hesitation, the imp turned around and started running towards the chamber's exit.

The horned fairy's half-lidded expression changed into a wide-eyed look of surprise before turning into a frown. Staring at the imp's back, she leaned forward to reach into the pile of mana shards on the floor in front of her.

For a moment, the imp looked confused, and then turned around again to take a spot at the back of the procession.

Ami positioned her Keeper sight for a better look, frowning as she thought about what she had observed. Whatever magical ability Anise was using to control her entourage wasn't registering as an attack to the dungeon heart. She hadn't tried to use it when she had briefly confronted Ami in the casting chamber, so perhaps it was something she had only recently learned.

With a repeated order from Ami, the imp turned around once again and ran towards the exit.

Now visibly irritated, the fairy-youma reached into the pile of black crystals again, giving Ami's zoomed-in Keeper Sight a great view of what she was doing. Her hand didn't just close randomly around one of the shards. Instead, she aimed straight for one specific crystal at the bottom of the pile that looked very different from the others. Bright, clear and elongated, it looked perfectly symmetrical and

intact, unlike the uneven shards surrounding it.

Within the transparent material, a faint pattern lit up briefly when Anise placed two fingers on one of the crystal's sides.

The imp returned to the back of the file of youma once again, and the circuit-like designs flickering within the clear gem winked out.

Ami considered the strange crystal. Was it something Anise had created herself? With its clean lines and almost technological look, it didn't fit the mutated fairy's dragon theme. She could have taken it from some other youma or even found it in the city. In any case, its origin was less important than stopping it from affecting Ami's employees. She could just ask the fairy where she got it later, once she was back to normal.

Being currently unattended, the mysterious gem could simply be picked up with Keeper Transport, which Ami did. She felt a little resistance from the crystal sticking to the ground somehow, but it came loose with a sharp popping noise nevertheless.

Anise gasped the instant the gem disappeared into storage. With a cry of despair, she launched herself into the pile of black crystals, only to collide face-first with the chitin-armoured chest of another youma who had been diving for the mana shards.

Crystals went flying every way as more youma landed on top of the two as they jumped at the pile of delicious food. The smarter ones stayed on the side lines to scavenge whatever shards were kicked and flung their way.

As Torian's roaring laughter echoed through the library, Ami hung her head and watched the chaos. Well, at least this proved that the crystal's control didn't linger.

Duke Libasheshtan sat at his desk, a quill in his hand as he concentrated on his penmanship.

Cathy's voice came from the direction of the door to his office. "Just another dwarf without a minion link setting off an alarm trap, nothing

to worry about."

The Duke grunted an acknowledgement, not taking his eyes off his work. The occasional false alerts were annoying, but Mercury considered infiltration, poison, and sabotage the greatest credible danger to Salthalls. It was an assessment he agreed with.

The ink in his inkwell vibrated from Cathy's footstep as she approached. "Isn't Mercury here to help with the planning?" she asked, casting a shadow over his work as she peered down at the immaculately drawn characters.

The Duke snorted. "I hardly need her assistance to give orders to my own people." He placed a final dot, and, satisfied, finally looked up at the human woman, only to boggle in surprise. His eyes widened as he took in her form-hugging leather outfit that wouldn't have looked too out of place on one of those horrible dark mistresses the empress employed.

Cathy tilted her head to the side upon seeing his raised eyebrows. "What's with that reaction? It doesn't even show any skin."

"But- no, that's not it," the Duke said, blinking. "I could have sworn you were wearing armour."

"Right, dwarven senses," Cathy muttered to herself. She clapped her hands, producing a metallic clang before they touched each other. "I am," she explained. "I just had a warlock turn it invisible for aesthetical reasons," she explained, sounding irritated. "Not a bad solution, but I keep accidentally bumping into things I thought I was clear of."

"The effect is rather unpleasant, Commander," the Duke said, "I recommend you not to use it around dwarfs."

"Noted," Cathy said. "So where is Mercury?"

"She mentioned something about revisiting an old experiment."

"… and then I realised that I don't actually need a completely sealed,

hollow adamantine container," Ami told Snyder as she excitedly gesticulated with the glass tube she held in her left hand. The noise of her lab coat swishing echoed faintly in the bare, white-tiled lab that she had designed to be easy to clean, not unlike a modern bathroom.

The red-haired acolyte standing behind a stainless steel pedestal looked up from the notes before him, his pale face betraying a certain lack of enthusiasm.

"Question," he said, interrupting her explanations. "Correct me if I am wrong, but this spell you are having me study," he met her eyes. "Isn't this the summoning spell with its safety features stripped out?"

"Yes, exactly," Ami nodded with a pleased smile.

"Oh dear. I was hoping I was mistaken," Snyder said, his eyes darting towards the exit from the lab. "I cannot conceive of any safe, let alone constructive application for summoning something into occupied space."

"Filtering," Ami replied.

The acolyte paused for a moment, raising his hand to his smooth chin before shaking his head. "How does flinging mashed-together bits at insane speeds in every direction make things less intermingled?"

Far from discouraged, Ami held the metal-capped glass tube closer for him to see. "We are going to teleport pure magical energy, so there's no need to worry about explosions," she said as she put one finger on the glass. "Watch, it passes right through solid objects."

To demonstrate, she pushed a bit of mana through the digit, producing a small glowing sphere attached to her fingertip that passed through the glass without resistance.

"I even made this container so I could pump all the air out first so that nothing but mana will be teleported," she continued.

Snyder pondered this for a moment. "Ah, well, that does sound like it could work," he said. "If there is no interaction between- wait a

moment, what does this have to do with filtering? Don't tell me…" he looked up in alarm, his gaze wandering to the only table in the room.

An anvil-like block of stone covered in white tiles protruded from the ground, topped by a metal plate. From its centre rose a light blue hilt like a tiny flagpole, the rest of the dagger buried deep within the thick steel.

"And suddenly, I am worried again," Snyder said. He started massaging his temples. "That's an adamantine weapon, isn't it?"

Ami simply nodded.

"Of course it is. Naturally, you want to teleport something that can pass through solid matter safely into the one thing it cannot. Why am I even surprised?"

"That isn't entirely correct," Ami said, her confidence audible in her voice. "In the absence of wards, uncontaminated mana will pass through adamantine easily enough."

"Meaning yours won't," the acolyte pointed out immediately.

"Which is why it will be filtered if it's teleported inside," Ami replied. "With the adamantine being indestructible, the contaminants will either get crushed into some harmless form or just stay stuck inside, leaving only uncontaminated mana to trickle out."

Snyder sighed and walked around the table, eyeing the steel keeping the dagger in place critically. "I don't know. Are you absolutely sure this is not going to end with an indestructible dagger being hurled in a random direction at speeds that would make lightning seem slow?"

"Yes, Snyder. You wouldn't be here if I hadn't already run a few tests myself," Ami said as she placed the glass tube onto a circular depression on the table. It locked into place with an audible click. "Nothing bad or violent happened using either mana, pure dark energy, or life energy."

The acolyte relaxed. "Oh, yes, that makes sense. You are obviously able to cast the spell yourself, possibly even at safe range." Now

looking more interested, he approached within touching range of the dagger. "So what happened?"

"In order, the experiments produced mana, mana, and life energy," she reported. "I was a little worried about the adamantine gobbling up the latter, but apparently, it doesn't do that unless activated first."

"That sounds like it is working according to your predictions," he said, looking over at her questioningly. "So why are we both here-oh. Oh no."

Ami had just transported an unconscious chicken into the room and was holding it in her arms. While she had expected Snyder's reluctance, the whine in his voice that implied she had failed to learn from previous experience still felt a little irritating.

"I remember that experiment," the acolyte said, backing away from the table, "and I have no desire to end up covered in chicken guts again!"

"That only happened after we tried to heal the chicken with synthetic holy power," she protested, running her fingers gently over the sleeping bird's feathers. "You are only here to evaluate the results and to figure out a warding scheme for collecting the filtered energy."

"I see. You need someone who can make it work without interfering with the summoning spell," Snyder said with a nod.

"Yes, but in a first step, I'll need you to just cast the spell. I'll be too busy manipulating the life energy to do it myself. Don't worry, with both circle and distance being so tiny, it won't tax you much." Ami petted the chicken once again before cancelling her possession spell.

In a streak of darkness, she popped up next to her glamoured golem twin. Though they both wore identical lab coats, nobody would confuse them standing side by side. Ami's eyes were glowing red while the golem's had reverted to aquamarine, and the chicken remained firmly in the animated statue's grasp.

Ami plunged her index finger into the animal's feather coat, touching skin, and cautiously drained a harmless amount of life energy. With the white glow trailing her digit like a misty thread, she touched it to the glass of her vacuum tube and pushed the faint wisp inside.

Snyder shot her a bemused look, glancing first at her and then at the golem.

"I only have enough control for this in my original body, especially when working through glass," Ami explained even as her visor expanded out over her eyes. The golems' ice just didn't conduct Metallia's dark energy with enough precision for the complicated fine manipulation needed to weave life energy into off-brand holy power.

"Very well." The redhead watched intently as Ami placed her hands left and right of the standing tube. Threads of black lightning darted from her fingertips into the mote of life energy floating within the container, dragging the glowing sphere into its centre. "I only have to get the ball, correct?"

"Yes," Ami confirmed. "You can start already; I should be finished before you."

The acolyte got to work, carefully evaluating the distance between the light energy and the dagger stuck in the table. As he started chanting, tiny counter-rotating circles of flame appeared around the weapon's thickest part, a section of the grip near the crossguard. Matching circles appeared within the glass tube, burning brightly despite the lack of air.

Ami only spared them enough attention to verify that their positions were correct before concentrating fully on her own part of the work. She felt a bead of sweat run down her forehead as she concentrated on twisting the energies into the right patterns. She doubted she would have managed to produce the delicate, complex structures required without the dungeon heart aiding with stabilisation, control, and memorisation. Perhaps some of the dwarfs might be able to do it though, given the intricateness of the artwork she had seen. Oh no, don't get distracted now.

The minutes passed faster than Ami had expected, and she barely

managed to finish before Snyder's voice rose to a crescendo. The spinning circles flared up a final time before they disappeared along with the sphere of synthetic light power at their centre. In an instant, the vacuum tube was completely empty, and a terrible sensation washed over Ami.

"Eeeep!"

Snyder flinched at the startled cry and looked up from the pulse of white light emanating from dagger. Spotting only the statue-still golem, he blinked at the empty spot where the blue-haired Keeper had just been standing, and then shrugged. "Success, I guess?"

Using Keeper transport to escape from danger was usually a great idea. Doing so on reflex, without a predetermined destination in mind, was considerably less so. As a Keeper, Ami couldn't keep herself stashed away in her own storage, after all.

She found herself at a new location, still staggering backwards from her leap away from the holy-infused dagger. Waving her arms to recover her balance, she caught a glimpse of Cathy's and Duke Libasheshtan's widening eyes as she stumbled past his desk. Oh, so she had appeared in his office – which was the last spot she had observed with her Keeper Sight, she quickly deduced.

Her back slammed into something hard before she could congratulate herself for learning something useful. She had run out of space and collided with a tall bookcase near the wall, which wobbled and buried her under an avalanche of books. A crystal chandelier above rang from the force of the impact.

"Mercury?" Cathy's voice called. The thick carpet muffled the clanging of her boots as she approached with rapid steps.

"Your Majesty?" Duke Libasheshtan reacted only a moment later, rising half from his seat to better peer over his desk.

"Ow," Ami complained, rubbing her head where a particularly heavy tome had struck her. She sat upright, causing some of the books to

slide off her, and looked up. "I'm fine, just startled," she said and held a hand out for Cathy to grab unto.

With a deft pull, the swordswoman helped the teenager back on her feet.

The Duke blinked rapidly at Ami as he inspected her more closely. "You are actually here in the flesh, your Majesty!" he exclaimed before he let himself fall back into his seat with a heavy thud. Kneading his nose bridge between thumb and index finger, he added in a wry tone, "Should I take it as an indictment of my work as your Regent that you are trying to kill yourself barely a day after I took the job?"

Ami stopped straightening out her lab coat to look at him. "I wasn't actually doing anything dangerous. Unpleasant, yes," she didn't try to suppress the large smile that was forcing its way onto her face, "but that means it was a success! Yes!" She pumped her fist in the air with an elated hop.

The dwarf raised an eyebrow. "Enthusiasm aside, please be careful. It would be exceedingly awkward if I had to explain that you tripped and broke your neck shortly after becoming my ward. That said," his voice became less dry, "what were you doing that has you in such a good mood?"

"Creating artificial holy power using adamantine!" she answered clapping her hands.

The Duke's jaw dropped as he stared at her, at a loss for words.

"You actually got it to work this time?" Cathy asked with barely any hint of disbelief.

"Yes!" Ami clapped her hands together, barely able to contain her excitement. "We'll finally have enough power to break the curses on the blinded citizens' eyes! Or to brute-force heal transformed dwarfs when the slime method seems unsafe!" she cheered.

"That sounds amazing," Cathy said with a smile. "And it works just like that?"

Ami's elation faded a little. "Well, I may have skipped a few steps. The holy power needs to be captured and stored in batteries." She shook her head, thinking. "No, make it wands instead. They can be brought into light temples and directly handed to priests." She paused. "Oh, I should inform Abbot Durval that he can focus entirely on healing now."

"I'm sure he'll be so disappointed about no longer needing to handle that creepy dark energy gauntlet you made for him," Cathy commented.

The abbot's training with the Metallia-energy infused gauntlet was redundant now that Ami had a way to produce holy energy without the dungeon heart ruining it.

She inclined her head, touching her chin as she thought out aloud, "Actually, it might be worth investing some time into developing a spell that can automatically transform the life energy for me." Her own contributions were the bottleneck here, as she had to treat the life force personally with Metallia's power.

"It sounds like the only thing stopping you here is minor details, your Majesty, surprising as this may be considering the topic." The Duke shook his head in disbelief before settling on a neutral expression. "However, it's fortunate that you are here. In light of the upcoming gala, there is a topic I need to discuss with you."

Hearing the seriousness in the dwarf's voice, Ami turned to give him her full attention. "Yes?"

"As your Regent, I have no choice but to point out that your…" he slowed down as if thinking about his phrasing, "preferences… concerning your redecoration efforts and sense of style are highly, well, inappropriate." To illustrate his point, he held up an empty envelope made from high-quality parchment.

With a sinking feeling, Ami focused on the white and golden rectangle clearly meant for official correspondence. Given his opening words, she could already guess what the problem was before she spotted it.

Hair-thin golden threads emblazoned the envelope, gathering into denser geometric patterns at its four corners. Tightly layered and overlapping, they formed decorative but abstract angular patterns. At least they would have, without a number of minimal distortions to the intricate web. They tricked the eye into composing the image of two bat-shaped women without a stitch of clothing between them framing the centre of the envelope.

Ami felt a blush creep up her cheeks and hung her head. "I see, this-" a jolt of alarm went through her as the Duke's exact words sank in, and her blush intensified. "Wait, you think I'm doing this on purpose?!" she shouted, staring at him wide-eyed.

At her sudden outburst, the Duke retreated deeper into his chair and looked her in the eyes inquisitively. "You mean you are not?"

So embarrassing, but she had failed to inform him about the details of her dungeon's Corruption, hadn't she? With everything else that was going on, it had never crossed her mind…

Looking apologetic, the dwarf continued, "I thought you were at an age where humans-"

"NO!" At this point, Ami's ears felt so hot as if they were about to combust, and Cathy's snickering wasn't helping. "It's a side effect of preventing the dark gods from using my dungeon heart to kill us all!" she elaborated.

"That's not exactly reassuring," Duke Libasheshtan said. "I almost prefer my previous assumption, your Majesty."

"They can't do anything now," Ami hurriedly assured him. "I fixed the weakness in the dungeon heart's design. It worked through the Corruption it pumps into the environment. The problem is that the more I control one of the Corruption's aspects, the less control I have over others. To fix the issue, I had to permit cosmetic alterations within my dungeon." In a small voice she added, "Of which Salthalls is now a part."

The Duke hummed as he took in the information. "I see. So the more scandalous elements of your wardrobe are due to the

influence of this Corruption?"

"Yes!" Ami confirmed, nodding rapidly.

"Actually, some cultural differences remain, your Grace," Cathy warned. "She sees absolutely nothing wrong with wearing skirts about this short." She brought her hand down to her thigh, indicating where the hem of Mercury's sailor skirt ended.

The Duke grimaced. "Cultural differences. Very well. On the bright side, that's still more modest than those fairy uniforms." He sighed. "Is there some way to mitigate or eliminate the effects of this Corruption? I can't bear thinking about what it will do to the ancient and priceless works of art in the city." His expression darkened. "Especially to the pieces with artistic nudity…"

Ami clasped her hands guiltily. "Well, dealing with it hasn't been a priority so far. I can think of some options, but they all have considerable drawbacks. For example, before the fighting started, I asked the dwarfs of Sirith Anlur to come up with acceptable designs that incorporate the Corruption's themes so it won't make further changes. I never heard back from them, though."

"Imagine that, with this war thing going on," Cathy deadpanned.

"You commissioned work from the exiles?" Duke Libasheshtan asked with sudden interest. "Intriguing. I will have to invite them to the gala. Still, that approach won't work for preserving the city."

"The other option is releasing control on the surface to impose harsher limits within the dungeon," Ami said. "However, that may render the surface uninhabitable."

"What kind of effects are we talking about?" The Duke asked.

Ami mentally estimated how much control she could maintain while still achieving her goals. "Inundations, lethal cold, crushing glaciers. Brittleness, decay, random magical effects. Insect plagues and poisonous, strangling thorn thickets," she listed. "All three themes supplemented by an undercurrent of generic evil."

Duke Libaheshtan was frowning when she finished. "… might be

tolerable..." he muttered to himself.

Ami couldn't believe her ears. "Um, I think you might be underestimating the lethality of those effects."

The Duke gave her a grave look. "Your Majesty, I believe you may be underestimating how much value we dwarfs put on protecting our irreplaceable historical treasures."

"But-"

"Consider the structures on the surface expendable," the Duke instructed. "Once you do, how much can you limit the collateral damage?"

Ami blinked. She didn't have a scenario ready that just gave up on the surface buildings, but once she permitted herself to consider that option, a new possibility presented itself. "Oh! I can cycle the effects!" she exclaimed. "Start with the rampant growth, kill it off with frost, then switch back," she said. "This way, the effects can't build up and spread into the surrounding regions."

Duke Libasheshtan nodded with grim acceptance. "Do it. That should tide us over until you come up with a better solution, or at least long enough to get the gala over while avoiding complete mortification."

Last edited: May 8, 2020

Fairy Audience

The ice and snow coating Salthalls glittered in the sun. Strong winds whipped clouds of mist past empty buildings and shook the withered thorn vines crawling across facades and roofs. Icicles dangled from one of the dead plants arching across the road, making it look like the upper jaw of an ancient predator. Its icy fangs quivered, not from the wind, but from the trembling of the ground as a large shadow blotted out the sun.

With loud shattering noises, something shaped like a huge maggot brushed the frozen vines aside as if they were mere spider webs. Metre-long spines protruded from its barky segments, reaching even the frozen vegetation connecting the roofs and tearing through them in a hail of broken icicles and plant matter. The being slowly inched forward and completely ignored the bombardment. Not even sharp-edged fragments tumbling into the gaps between its stiff segments and reaching the silk-like webbing underneath could catch its attention.

Two pinpricks of red light shone behind a tall window of one of the buildings burrowed half into the mountainside. Ami's breath condensed on the cold glass in front of her as she watched the crawling creatures scraping wide trails through the snow. She turned towards the room's second window, where seven insect-winged girls were huddled together.

Three of the fairies were leaning shoulder to shoulder on the windowsill, their faces so close to the glass that it was fogging up. Three more peered over them, also trying to get a good look at the wintery landscape. The final one had her hands on her sisters' backs to push herself up, rapidly beating her wings to lighten the load. Her hovering caused a strong breeze in the already uncomfortably cold chamber.

Ami cleared her throat to catch their attention.

Dandel, the eldest of the fairies, reacted first. The indigo-haired girl

straightened and turned towards Ami. This caused Roselle's hand on her back to slip. The orange-eyed sister lost her balance, and her steady hover turned into an involuntary dive even as the buzzing of her wings intensified. With a startled yelp, she bumped into the small group of girls.

Some jostling, a chorus of startled noises, and an indignant screech when a cheek made contact with the cold glass later, all of the fairy sisters had noticed Ami looking at them and turned to face her.

She gestured towards the various couches and armchairs arranged around the room's fireplace in a wordless invitation, claiming a high-backed seat with red upholstery for herself.

Camilla, as the official Ambassador, sat down separate from the others in an armchair directly across the low coffee table from Ami. Roselle and Tilia picked the couch to the blonde's left, close to the fireplace. Dandel, Anise and Melissa took the couch on her right. Cerasse ended up in the armchair furthest away and brushed away a few specks of dust that had gathered there since the dwarfs had abandoned the surface.

"As you can see," Ami said, inclining her head towards the windows, "I have good reasons for delaying the construction of your new embassy."

Cerasse abruptly stopped her cleaning efforts and looked up. "What exactly are those creepy things?" She asked curiously. A moment later, her purple eyes widened in alarm and she quickly tacked on the "Your Imperial Majesty" she had forgotten.

"You don't have to worry about addressing me formally while it's only us here," Ami reassured her with a gentle smile. In truth, she still hadn't gotten entirely used to being treated like an Empress. For a moment, she wondered how many people would only talk to her painstakingly according to protocol out of spite if they knew it made her feel a little awkward. "As for your question, they are hives. Colonies of venomous bugs taking shelter in the frozen remnants of cacti."

The redhead wedged between Dandel and Melissa glanced at the

amulet placed among the plates with snacks on the table. As it remained dark, there were no people scrying on them. Without hesitation, Anise took advantage of the absence of potential lip readers to accept Ami's offer and speak freely. "What in the world made you think it was a good idea to let those overgrown pincushions loose in the city?"

Ami scratched the back of her head. "Ah, that was unintentional. They are an undesired side effect of rerouting my dungeon's Corruption to the surface. Periodically cycling through different modes was supposed to make the different effects counter each other."

Dandel tilted her head to the side. "How does this lead to shambling plant husks, your Majesty?"

"A little overlooked problem," Ami admitted, her cheeks flushing lightly. "The cold part of the cycle was supposed to kill off the lifeforms generated by the hyper-fertility part, but then the river started freezing up and threatened to turn into a dam. I had to make some quick adjustments to exclude it, which unfortunately allowed some of the bugs to find shelter and adapt."

The fairies stared at her in silence, various expressions flitting over their faces. Cerasse raised a sceptical eyebrow, Melissa was blinking rapidly, and Anise narrowed her eyes in annoyance.

"… don't want to be pumped full of Corruption," Roselle muttered as she scanned the corners of the room for suspicious alterations.

"Right. Rerouting Corruption to the surface," Camilla said after a moment. "But, why? Why would you even do something like that?"

"To protect the rest of the city," Ami answered. "The idea is giving the Corruption an outlet so it stops enforcing its more, um, embarrassing themes elsewhere."

Tilia snorted. The emerald-haired fairy sat with her legs folded, demonstratively staring at Ami's short skirt through half-lidded eyes. "As if you would mind."

Ami felt the blood rush to her cheeks at the reminder of her undeserved reputation. She wringed her hands for a moment as she suppressed her first reaction and swallowed her protests. Arguing the point right now just was unlikely to change their minds. Instead, she let out a long breath. "Most of the people who live in the city do. They aren't as comfortable with suggestive outfits as you are."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Melissa growled, an uncharacteristic look of indignation on the usually placid fairy's face.

The fairies were wearing their white uniforms, which blurred the line between a one-piece swimsuit and a bikini. They covered even less than Ami's Sailor Mercury uniform and were, in her opinion, just a simple colour switch removed from looking like typical Underworld wear. With as little insulation as their clothing provided, the sisters had to be using some magic to keep warm.

"I mean that lots of people here have a low tolerance for bare skin," Ami clarified in order not to needlessly antagonise the fairies. She had a small request for them, after all. "In any case, I was hoping that you could contact your superiors to notify them about the current difficulties with constructing the embassy on the surface. If it's acceptable to them, the plans can be altered to build it underground instead."

Camilla briefly glanced at her sisters, but they were leaving the answer up to the actual ambassador. After a moment, she inclined her head in a nod. "That sounds reasonable."

She didn't sound very enthusiastic, and Melissa and Roselle showed slightly bitter expressions. The others were keeping their faces carefully neutral, but their postures shifted slightly as they tensed up.

It was clear to Ami that they weren't eager to report that except for Tilia, they had all formed minion links. Sure, it hadn't been voluntary, and Ami had severed them as soon as the sisters were able to think clearly again, but that wouldn't shield them from the repercussions. She had better distract them from their justified resentment for ruining their careers with something more pleasant, she thought guiltily.

"Good. In the meantime, you have free choice of accommodations. You may opt to stay with the civilians, move into the quarter reserved for the cured dwarfs, or into a temple," she listed. "If you don't like any of those options, you can also pick any building in the city. Just let me know first so I can keep the insane dwarfs away. Finally, if you prefer, I can also construct you a temporary home to your specifications."

"I believe a shrine would-"

"Can we have a heated pool?"

Dandel and Melissa, who had started speaking at the same time, stopped to look at each other.

"I don't mind if you discuss your options among each other first," Ami said.

Cerasse looked thoughtful. "I don't know, doesn't this feel a little like a bribe?" she pondered.

Dandel's pupils contracted, and she shot the purple-haired girl a look that all but screamed, "Don't say things like that out loud!"

Ami had to admit that Cerasse's suspicion wasn't entirely off the mark. While she genuinely wanted to recompense them for the hardships they had suffered, she also needed them in a cooperative mood. "You can always run your decision past your superiors first to avoid giving the wrong impression," she suggested quickly.

Camilla nodded. "That would be for the best if I'm contacting them anyway."

"Indeed." Ami hesitated for a moment before continuing with fake reluctance, "At the same time, you may as well ask for permission to attend a gala Duke Libasheshtan will be holding to celebrate his appointment as Regent of my Empire."

The blonde was about to nod before she froze, her eyes widening and her jaw dropping.

"Wait, what?" Roselle asked, sitting up straighter.

"Did you say 'Regent'?" Melissa asked, blinking.

"Are you serious?" Anise seemed the most incredulous of the lot.

Ami had to stop herself from giggling at their flabbergasted expressions. She was pretending to be annoyed about the devious dwarven plot, after all. In a flat voice, she answered, "It was the only way the dwarfs would agree to opening negotiations with me, even if it's over a middleman."

"And you are willing to go along with that, your Majesty?" Dandel asked curiously.

Well, yes. It was Ami's own plan, after all. Still, she did her best to sound grumpy as she answered, "Their laws don't really leave me a choice. It's either going along or forcing them to consider their citizens lost and hostile combatants, with all that entails."

Camilla gulped. "Yes, that would be horrible."

"So you want to avoid a fight," Tilia said. The somewhat smug twitch of her lips indicated that she was coming up with her own conclusions about Ami's motivations. "So why invite us? Wouldn't you want to keep such an embarrassing predicament secret?" At that point, she wasn't putting much effort into hiding her glee, which earned her a warning look from her eldest sister.

"Well, I'd prefer not to go along with all of this only for the dwarfs to back out of the deal as soon as it's convenient," Ami said. "The more public the proceedings, the greater the shame if they break the agreement. Thus, having an ambassador from the Shining Concord Empire attend will greatly reduce the chance of open hostilities resuming. Besides, your presence will reassure other diplomats that they have nothing to fear from me."

Anise jumped to her feet, her face red. "Nothing to fear? You turned us into monsters!" she yelled, pointing her finger accusingly at Ami.

Next to the redhead, Dandel twitched and bit her lips, and then urgently tugged on her sister's wing to try to get her to sit back down.

Ami shrank back in her seat. While the redhead posed only minimal danger to her, even considering her magic, being shouted at by someone with a justified grudge still made her uncomfortable. "That-that was a complete accident! I turned you back as soon as I had a cure!" she defended herself.

"Because you had already achieved your goal of turning us into your minions!" Anise countered. She winced when the tugging on her wing became painfully insistent. With a sideways glare at her indigo-haired sister, she let herself fall back down on the couch.

Ami shook her head. "But that doesn't make sense. If that had been my goal, then why would I have sent you to Salthalls, where I would have very little control over the situation? It would have been much more straightforward to just transform you at my dungeon."

"To serve as a distraction? Plausible deniability?" Cerasse speculated, earning herself a grateful nod from Anise.

Ami sighed. "No. What would I have to gain from making you form a link just to sever it again? Without even keeping it a secret?"

Neither Anise nor Cerasse had an immediate answer. In the sudden silence, Roselle muttered, "Now that's a question that's certain to keep me up at night."

"Well, it's evil," Melissa pointed out. "Keepers do evil things for no particular reason all the time."

Ami hesitated. That was a frustratingly simple argument that was nevertheless true and somewhat undermined her position. "Well, *I* don't!" she said lamely. "I wouldn't make more unnecessary trouble for myself by causing you harm on purpose. That would be completely pointless and counter-productive!"

Melissa frowned. "Still turned us into minions and ruined our future," she said and turned her head aside with a resentful sniff.

Ami averted her gaze from the dark looks the seven sisters sent in her direction. "And I'm really extremely sorry about that," she said quickly. "I will be offering restitution as soon as I can make sure it

won't be interpreted as bribery or cause you further complications," she added. In a firmer voice, she clarified, "It was still an accident, though!"

Tilia uncrossed her arms and straightened her spine so she could deliberately look outside. "You do seem rather accident-prone. Sounds like it's a good thing you will be getting some adult oversight soon, doesn't it?"

Dandel clapped her hands. With a strained smile, she said, "I believe it might be best to return to the topic of the gala, your Majesty."

Ami relaxed her grip on her armrest and smiled gratefully. "Ah, yes. As I said, it would be most convenient if you brought it up with your superiors along with the possible blueprint change and the issue of your interim lodgings. You probably want to avoid giving the impression that you were doing me a favour."

Anise, with her arms crossed, immediately interjected, "Which it would be. Camilla, I'm not sure we should be doing her a favour."

Ami narrowed her eyes. "It's a favour to everyone currently living at Salthalls, as it will help keep them alive. Avoiding further combat is in everyone's best interest." She turned her head to address Cammilla directly. "Besides, isn't meeting important people part of your job as an Ambassador anyway?"

"That's true," Camilla admitted.

Tilia leaned forward. "Wait a moment, important people? Nobody important is going to risk entering a dungeon, right? Especially after what happened!"

"Actually, that won't be a problem," Ami said. "Duke Libasheshtan isn't holding the gala here, but at one of his other holdings." With a theatrical wave of her hand meant to avoid startling the fairies, she transported a map into the room.

The roll floated towards them in mid-air before slowly unrolling. It drifted down until it hovered a hand's width above the mostly

untouched snacks.

"There," Ami said as she pointed at a location south of Salthalls with a hovering fork. "Fortress Nailcastle."

The fairies farthest away got up to get a closer look.

"Nailcastle?" Roselle said, frowning worriedly. "I can't think of a single way in which that name inspires confidence."

"The rock spire that the castle is built into is called 'the Nail', since it's tall and pointy," Ami explained.

Cerasse took a step forward and studied the map, her eyes darting back and forth between the different settlements. "Well, I can't fault the dwarfs for not expending much creativity on naming that place. It looks like a complete backwater."

"Makes sense," Anise nodded. Raising her hand to hide her mouth, she stage whispered, "Wouldn't want to invite *her* anywhere *important*," and promptly earned herself a reprimanding kick to her ankle from Dandel.

Ami pretended not to have heard the redhead's comment. "Nailcastle is the Duke's outpost farthest from Salthalls that still has a suitable ballroom and a hero gate. As for guests, well, the Avatar will be attending. Perhaps you could convince him to put in a good word for you with your superiors?"

The fairies sat up straighter.

"The Avatar?" Roselle's orange eyes gleamed.

Cerasse nodded after a moment of thought. "It makes sense he would want to be there to keep an eye on things."

"It certainly sounds like an opportunity…" Dandel considered, sounding as if she was still trying to find fault with Ami's suggestion.

As the sisters started chattering among themselves, Melissa addressed Ami: "Empress Mercury, will General Jadeite be attending the gala too?"

Camilla closed her eyes and let out an exasperated sigh.

Ami felt a flicker of irritation. "Unfortunately, his presence here at Salthalls remains necessary for sustaining the eyesight-restoring glamour on the cursed civilians, I'm sorry to say." She wasn't feeling very sorry at all.

Melissa's face fell briefly before lighting up again. "Right, I can just find him here instead."

"There won't be any shortage of interesting people to meet at the gala," Ami said. "Aside from dwarfs, there will also be human and elven delegations."

"Sounds fun," Roselle commented. "Will there be good food and music?"

Ami nodded in confirmation.

"Well, I'm game. It will be great to get some proper daylight again."

"I wouldn't want to miss it either," Anise said. She was facing her sisters, but watching Ami from the corners of her eyes. "Empress Mercury having to accept an appointed regent! You can't get that kind of entertainment elsewhere!"

Camilla quickly cleared her throat. "Ahem. Right. I'll see what I can do to properly represent the Shining Concord Empire at this memorable occasion, your Majesty!"

"Good." Ami nodded and got to her feet to signal that the audience was over. "Duke Libasheshtan is in charge of the preparations. Contact him if you require an appropriate wardrobe or other supplies."

Following her example, the fairies stood and made various polite noises of gratitude as they bowed. Dandel's bow was the deepest, while Anise's was barely more than a nod.

As the group was taking the first steps toward the door, Ami called out, "Oh, Anise? Stay for a moment, please."

The redhead froze, blood draining from her face. She slowly turned back to Ami, a light sheen of sweat on her forehead as she was apparently starting to regret her confrontational attitude.

Her sisters stopped too and watched with concerned expressions. Dandel in particular looked ready to step protectively in front of her ruby-eyed sister.

Ami wasn't petty enough to let the group worry just because one of them had been a little aggressive. Quickly, she raised her left hand, palm facing the ceiling, and reached into her Keeper storage. A clear, elongated crystal filled with complex glowing conduits appeared floating above her palm. "Do you recognise this?"

Anise's eyes widened in surprise, even as some tension faded from her body. Her right hand rose as if she wanted to reach for the gem, only to change direction after a moment as she crossed her arms.

"Do you still remember where you got it from?" Ami asked even as she moved the crystal a little farther away.

The healed transformation victims generally kept their memories of the experience, which included the knowledge of how to perform magical techniques they had access to as a youma. Granted, most of them were unusable without the matching body, but it would be relatively simple for a talented mage to derive a functional spell from knowledge of the incomplete ability.

Ami was understandably wary about someone being able to create crystals that could control her troops.

"Yes," Anise admitted. "I found it in a crate full of gems."

Ami breathed a little easier. The thing being some kind of dwarven treasure was preferable to it being potentially mass-producible. "Where?"

The fairy tilted her head to the side. "Your treasury, obviously. Where else would one of your command tokens be?" After a moment, her pupils shrunk in sudden realisation. "I didn't mug anyone for it!" she said, raising her hands defensively.

"A command token?" Ami asked, somewhat distracted by the question of how something from Salthalls could have ended up inside one of her sapphire crates.

Anise shrugged her shoulders. "Well, I don't know your name for it, but that's what I call it. Since it's used to command your minions."

"I see." If anything, Ami had more questions than before, and her eyes narrowed. "What makes you so certain it's one of mine?"

Anise shot her an incredulous look. "Well, what else am I supposed to think when it's in your treasury, in a crate with your emblem on it, works on your minions, and has your shadow inside?"

"It has what now?" Ami blinked wide-eyed at the crystal that had just skipped ahead in her priority queue.

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Crystal Investigation

A dungeon heart's standard library pattern included the expected bookshelves, lecterns, and reading tables. However, it also came with test tubes, alembics and similar research equipment. This didn't sit well with Ami, who doubted the wisdom of having experimenting warlocks and flammable books together in the same room. Therefore, she had split her library into a reading area and a separate laboratory built from fireproof stone. It turned out to be a prudent decision.

Thick clouds of grey steam billowed out of the crystal she had taken from Anise, rapidly filling the chamber behind the sturdy observation window.

Ami's eyes widened, and she stopped mid-typing to whip her head around and stare at the bald warlock assisting her. "What did you do, Harold?" she shouted in alarm.

The researcher seemed to shrink under her stare as if trying to hide behind the row of differently sized crystal balls on his workbench. Little beads of sweat appeared on his bald and tattooed scalp, glittering purplish in the light emanating from under her visor. "I w-w-was just c-calibrating the m-magnification, your Majesty, I swear!" he replied, tapping his finger against one of the spheres.

She redirected her gaze to the device that, contrary to her expectation, wasn't showing a close up-image of the circuitry within the gem.

Harold gulped as he realised what it looked like. "It's not off, it's just dark!" he blurted out. "In fact, it's stuck! There has to be some kind of warding on the thing!"

A functional ward against scrying? Normally, Ami would be salivating at the thought of studying it. Unfortunately, saving it from going up in flames took priority. She quickly zoomed in on the smoking gem with her Keeper sight, bypassing the steam and the glass that was fogging up.

So far, the crystal seemed intact, but it was sliding back and forth violently. Keeping the gem on a small dish floating in a water-filled bucket had seemed like a fine idea to keep it from touching her dungeon directly, at least before the water had started boiling inexplicably.

A trio of particularly large rising bubbles struck the floating dish at the same time, causing it to capsize. With a quiet splash, the gem sunk to the bottom.

Its motion reduced the precision of the readings from Ami's visor, which had just started to become interesting. She had detected traces of an invisibility spell coming from inside the crystal, which would certainly explain why she hadn't yet found any sign of the shadow Anise had described.

Did she need to interfere, or should she keep analysing what was going on with her visor? So far, the crystal didn't seem to be taking any damage. The twisted little pathways in its interior seemed to be vibrating at a high frequency, but they weren't generating any heat directly.

Infra-red indicated that the water was heating up fairly uniformly, which indicated-

It was hard to think. Huh, why she was on the floor? Had she been taking a nap? She felt like she could drift off back to sleep any moment.

Her visor flashed lines in an irritating red colour at her.

She blinked. Red was bad, wasn't it? Scrunching up her forehead, she tried to make sense of the symbols before her. That one over there was a seven, she was pretty sure. Wait, why was she having trouble with this?

The sudden spike of alarm cleared some of the haze from her mind. Her desire for wakefulness clashed with a pressure trying to lull her back to sleep, its concealment broken by directly opposing her will.

There was an intruder in her head! Startled, she started paying close

attention to her thoughts, trying to separate her own mental processes from foreign ones.

The spell numbing her thoughts was now dealing with a target too agitated to go to sleep even if she wanted to, expended the last of its power, and faded away. In response, the foreign presence in her mind gave up on subtlety. An impression of cold fury, screaming skulls, and a burning crown radiated outwards from it.

Ami froze in horror. How could Crowned Death be here?

The giant skull composed of black fire and more skulls barrelled towards her like a tsunami, howling with bloodlust.

Impossible. While Ami wasn't completely certain that the dark god couldn't get into her head somehow, she knew that he wouldn't need to bother with petty tricks like trying to get her to fall asleep. She was dealing with one of his underlings trying to possess her.

The corners of her lips quirked upwards. In a battle of pure magical power, she was confident that she could outlast her attacker.

Her perspective shifted. The wall of fire and skulls that had been about to fill her entire mindscape retreated and shrunk as her own mental representation grew. The distance between her and the intruder expanded at the same rate as her own size increased, and she decided that there should be gravity, and a floor.

The enemy's advance turned into a lunge that fell way short of its target. The intruder flopped to the ground with a wet smack, sending skulls and flames bouncing in every direction. A prone spectral figure in black robes decorated with chains remained behind.

Ami crouched down and reached for the surprised spectre before it could recover.

Pinned between her thumb and index finger, the thing squirmed like a caterpillar, unable to move either digit even a little. Neither was it able to ignore physics and obstacles as it did in the real world.

Ami frowned. Without a doubt, this was the spectre who had once controlled many aquatic undead and who had gotten loose when

she got trapped in the adamantine box. Why was it here now, and what did it have to do with the crystal she had been investigating? Speaking of which, she really should check what was going on with that, too.

"-Majesty? Are you all right, your Majesty?" Harold's voice came from his corner of the room. The warlock was at the side of his workbench, looking undecided on whether he should rush to her aid or flee the room.

"I'll be fine," she commented, focusing on her visor. The crystal was no longer producing heat, but there, in red, she saw the outline of a root-like underground tendril connecting the six-sided gem with her left foot.

Apparently, the spectre had sprung an ambush from within the gem, phasing through the solid matter underneath the floor to sneak up on her.

Well, that neatly explained what exactly Anise had seen inside the crystal. Still, Ami wasn't satisfied. The spectre shouldn't have been sapient, let alone smart enough to use tricks and deception. She wanted answers, and she could extract some from the creature currently trapped by her will if she dared to seize them.

A part of her balked at the idea. Sifting through Keeper Malleus' memories had been bad enough. Diving into the mind of a creature that may or may not be a tiny fragment of a dark god had the potential to be much, much worse.

Thinking on the issue for a bit, she decided that she should be fine if she took precautions. She would start with its most recent memories and slowly go backwards in time. The being hadn't been able to commit any atrocities while stuck in her dungeon, after all.

She checked up on the state of her prisoner once more. The spectre was trapped in the same condition as it had intended for her to end up in, unable to think under the pressure she was exerting on its mind and effectively comatose. Safe enough, but she wasn't going to take any risks. One imagined rubber band wrapped around her fingers later, the spectre would get squished the moment she lost

concentration.

Satisfied with her precautions, she forced her way into the being's memories.

A strange, distorted view of squished-together shapes and odd colours appeared before her. The spectre didn't see like living things did, but relied on magical senses that were closer to Keeper sight.

Disoriented, Ami hesitated for a moment as she learned to make sense of what she was seeing. It didn't take her long to figure out the colours didn't match the visual spectrum and that the spectre had 360-degree vision, which was annoying, but not incomprehensible. At least it was perceiving the world through something like magical radar or echolocation and not something that the next Incarnation of Extinction she ran into could use to kill everything around it.

Her prisoner's intentions, on the other hand, were straightforward and easy to interpret. This attack had been a premature assassination attempt. Fearing discovery, the spectre had been forced to act before its preparations were complete. The plan was to knock Ami out, take enough control to make her drop her possession spell, and then inflict a fatal wound on her body. Its success chances had been minimal from the start, given the power disparity, but minimal was still better than non-existent from not acting at all.

The spectre's original plan had been both simpler and more dangerous at once. It was going to gather enough magical power to force a possession without bothering with fighting for control, and then explode once within her true body.

Ami grimaced at the thought. That kind of attack could have worked on her if it caught her by surprise, as it targeted her, rather than the body she was possessing. Now she knew why the creature had tricked Anise into collecting dark magic crystals, too. It could drain power from them, though it took some time digesting it. Why did it pick the fairy, anyway?

Ami jumped a little farther through the spectre's memories, catching

short glimpses each time. Most of it was the simple drudgery of lying below a pile of black shards and slowly extracting magical power from them. The treasury's occupants changed with each glimpse. Occasionally, the gem housing the spectre got picked up by Anise to establish control over yet another underling.

Ami paid particularly close attention to that process. According to the being's thoughts, it could have seeded pieces of itself within their bodies, similar to how it controlled and animated corpses. In this case, however, it deemed such an approach more prone to detection and wasteful to boot, as illusions of the Keeper giving orders worked just as well. It could even trick the transformed fairy into casting the spells herself without realising it to preserve more mana.

Ami paused. Trickery, deceit and illusions were not what she would have expected from an undead minion of Crowned Death. Subtlety just didn't seem like his usual modus operandi. Of course, that also gave him the advantage of surprise if he employed it sparingly. Still, she wouldn't have believed the spectre to be able of more than instinctive action after it lost so many of its component undead. Putting such a plan together and executing it should have been completely beyond it. She also hadn't figured out yet why it opted to work through the crystal, or why it was hiding inside in the first place.

One of the memories she checked actually showed her the spectre drawing Anise's attention to the gem crate. The being didn't know who she was, but her magic showed up brighter in its strange vision. This seemed to signify to the monster that she would be compatible with – yikes. Ami really didn't need to know a spell-boosting method that consumed the caster as fuel. Without delving into its details, she checked back further in time.

The crystal stuck inside of a gem crate. Irrelevant.

Inside of the same shaking crate on a train. Still irrelevant.

Suddenly having a monochrome viewpoint that more resembled normal vision, accompanied by impulses she'd expect from a very murderous instinct-guided animal? That was very interesting, and possibly too far back.

Ami considered the memory. This was back at her now abandoned dungeon, even though it was a bit hard to recognise with the spectre's vision somehow being able to see through walls. Its simplistic thought processes matched what she would have expected from the undead minion more closely. The main difference between its sapient and its animalistic state was the gem, which it had apparently found in her dungeon.

She examined more memories, going slightly forward in time, until she found one that caught her attention.

The spectre moved through her dungeon, unbound, moving towards a glow that stood out strongly to its magical senses and enraged it. Something was calling out, lighting up like a beacon, and the spectre would stop at nothing to destroy this rival.

The ethereal thing ghosted through several walls until it ended up in a sapphire-filled treasure chamber. Among the monochrome field of jewels, one crystal glowed bright blue in the spectre's vision. From each facet, a flailing tendril extended, reaching and grasping blindly.

To Ami, the crystal resembled some strange, injured sea creature. The tendrils looked as if they had been longer originally and something had torn them off.

The spectre reacted like a predator spotting a wounded prey animal and pounced, going right for the frayed end of one of the tendrils. Grasping the appendage with both hands, it started sucking nourishment from the wound.

The gem reacted to the assault by trying to stab its remaining tendrils into its attacker.

From the spectre's memories, Ami could tell that those attacks actually inflicted damage on it, unlike her own futile efforts to hurt it directly. The fight itself was something of a chaotic mess, as the creature didn't really remember the details clearly. It remembered aggression and wills clashing, pain, ripping and tearing, and pitting magical power against each other as both creatures tried to subsume each other.

In the end, the spectre proved itself a little stronger than its opponent and crushed the gem-creature's will, turning it into an empty husk. As the survivor possessed the crystal's inert corpse, its thoughts achieved clarity, rising above mere animal instinct.

The crystal seemed to provide as much mental capacity as an entire horde of animal zombies, which Ami found rather concerning. At least now, she knew why the spectre had been more capable than she expected. There was more, though. She got a first-person perspective of how the undead creature digested its gains. Its memories were back to the odd mode of vision in the first memory she had accessed – which seemed to be that of the crystal.

In an uncomfortable parallel to what Ami was doing right now, the monster had been looking at the memories of its victim. She got to observe them twice removed, which felt a little odd. Somehow like watching someone's memories of watching a TV show. If said TV was for magical senses humans didn't have. The spectre seemed to be rather bad at using the gem's senses, since the crystal's own memories were clearer and more vivid-looking. Most of them, however, were from the familiar perspective of an imp.

Ami was running into a little trouble finding what she wanted, as the spectre hadn't accessed the crystal's knowledge in chronological order. Between self-satisfied gloating to itself about beating a minion of the hated Unraveller – Ami took note of the gem's origin – and a hunger for more, it had mostly been interested in locating more victims.

She did catch some useful glimpses, not that the spectre agreed. There were foreign imps in her gem furnace room, each one with a crystal just like the one she was investigating embedded in the forehead. A network of straight lines connected each of these gems with each other, visible as a transparent overlay to the imp's vision.

The picture of said workers disassembling one of her gem furnaces in a coordinated effort worried her, but when she saw that they spent as much time and effort on the useless distractions as on the real mechanisms, she relaxed. It was clear that they didn't understand enough to know what was important.

She was more interested in their leader, the clearly Keeper-possessed dark mistress. Unfortunately, the spectre hadn't been, so it didn't pay much attention to her. Ami got a few glimpses of the intruder walking off towards her treasury, and that was it.

The spectre had been much more interested in hungrily eyeing the imps swarming over her equipment, wondering if it could catch up to them.

Ami, in contrast, was fascinated by the eerie coordination of the imps as they took apart the gem furnace bit by bit, handing each other pieces and tools without ever communicating or even looking at each other. Was that how the Unraveller of Mysteries got her name? It certainly looked as if the minions managed to take everything without inflicting damage, and she doubted they would have trouble piecing it back together again.

They didn't have an instruction manual, she reassured herself. Without knowing the right temperature range, the furnace wouldn't produce sapphires.

She skimmed through more memories, trying to get a better look at the dark mistress so she could identify the intruding Keeper.

Working imps, more working imps, more hungry gazing at forehead gems…

She paused as the imp the crystal was personally controlling licked the ashes in the growth cavity. According to the crystal's memories, it was analysing its composition. To Ami's alarm, it got surprisingly accurate results. She briefly wondered about imps being forced to eat all kinds of weird and harmful things just so the gem could recognise the taste. Did the intruders have similar ways to determine temperature and duration?

Questions for later. Where did the thieves come from? There were no memories to find before their arrival at Ami's dungeon. Apparently, the imps had been created on-site by the Keeper, using the possessed dark mistress as a piece of claimed ground. The crystal's earliest memory was a literal headache from being stabbed into an imp's head without any kind of anaesthetics. A dead end for

her investigation.

Also, her speculation about the imps ingesting harmful substances in the name of chemistry had apparently been wrong. Fortunately, the gem furnaces had already cooled down from their operating temperature before the imps got here. At this point, she wouldn't be surprised if the crystals could get an accurate read on temperature by the painful burns they inflicted too. That sounded like a technique the dark gods would enjoy.

For a moment, she considered what kind of burns an imp would suffer from touching an active gem furnace before dismissing the unproductive thought. She still didn't know who had broken into her dungeon, aside from the fact that they had the Unraveller's support.

Her search continued. She saw a few scenes of the ice golem fighting the imps – the spectre found it amusing to watch something that looked like Keeper Mercury fail against the weakest kind of dungeon denizen that existed. She also saw the imp in which the captured gem was embedded die. The perspective shift from imp vision to crystal vision was rather jarring. It dropped into a deep, bent gap between two pieces of machines, sliding too far for the short arms of its allies to retrieve it. They could have managed to get it out eventually if they hadn't been retreating in a hurry, or if they had paid less attention to salvaging machinery.

Ami felt a renewed surge of worry. Was it possible they had retrieved enough of the furnace to figure out its operation? Normally, she would not think so, but with the Unraveller involved… Which phases would give a reverse engineer the most trouble? As she started mentally going through the steps, she hesitated.

Why did her mind keep circling back to the details of her gem furnace's inner workings when she was interested in tracking down the intruders? It wasn't relevant to her investigation at all.

Her eyes narrowed in suspicion. Was she being manipulated?

Of course not. There was obviously no subtle way to make her divulge that the correct temperature for the crystal forming process was-

Stop it!

A crystal-clear mental pulse that conveyed the message "It was worth a try" along with the equivalent of a shrug and a feeling of amused mockery answered her.

An instant later, the spectre radiated a feeling of mortal terror before abruptly disappearing from her mind.

Darn it! Ami suspected that the moment of animalistic fear had been her only genuine glimpse into the creature's mind, rather than at the carefully constructed façade that its puppet master had shown her. Expecting a renewed mental attack, she took an instant too long to focus her attention outward.

The crystal was slurping the elongated form of the spectre up like a noodle. According to Ami's visor, the ghostly being was now plain dead, rather than undead. The spiking energy levels in the gem also suggested that the process was fuelling a spell.

Without a flash or any other overt magical effects, a small sphere of matter just large enough to contain the gem disappeared. The surrounding water rushed in to fill the void and then spilled out through the circular hole in the bucket's bottom to fill the semi-spherical depression gouged out of the floor.

Ami doubted that the gem creature had simply committed an elaborate form of suicide. Typing frantically on her palmtop computer, she first checked if she wasn't dealing with some new form of trickery or illusion, and then confirmed traces of teleportation magic. She stomped her foot in frustration.

In the back, Harold silently tried to make himself smaller and less visible, trembling faintly. He froze when her gaze snapped onto him.

"Try to track that crystal, quickly," she ordered. There was a chance the thing hadn't gotten far with the power it had available. Its teleportation spell wasn't an innate ability, judging by its effects on the gem's environment, so it should be rather expensive to cast so quickly.

"At once, your Majesty!" The warlock almost toppled his crystal ball in his haste to touch it. "Seeking, seeking, I'm getting something, nearly - got it!" he shouted excitedly.

In an instant, Ami was right next to him and stared into the scrying device.

The gem was lying on the broken tip of a chalk-white stalagmite. It glittered in the single ray of sunlight that shone like a spotlight through a tiny gap in the cave's roof.

Ami didn't believe for an instant that the crystal had landed in the only illuminated spot by sheer good fortune. This was either an attempt to mislead her, outright mockery, or possibly both.

An imp stepped into the small circle of light and grabbed the gem.

On second thought, it might also have been a deliberate arrangement to make itself more visible to allies. Ami still wasn't willing to rule out the other possibilities though and grabbed a crystal ball of her own. "Keep a view of that location, they might be working with illusions," she instructed.

Meanwhile, the imp was bringing the pointy end of the gem up to his forehead with trembling arms.

Ami scried on the crystal herself and got a view of the same location as Harold. Unlike the warlock, she brought her perspective closer and closer to the gem, which earned her an unfortunate close-up view of the minion's face contorting in pain as he shoved the crystal slowly into his own forehead. Fighting through her revulsion, she zoomed in on the inside of the gem.

Her crystal ball went dark, which matched Harold's results earlier and confirmed she was looking at the real thing.

She discarded the temporary useless scrying device for another.

There was a flash of green from Harold's crystal ball, and the warlock bit back a curse. "It teleported!" He reported.

"Maintain view of the cave," Ami ordered. The place where the gem

had first landed might be important, and once the crystal ball's point of view changed, it couldn't simply flip back to a previous one. With another scrying device in hand, she searched for the vanished gem herself.

The resulting image was an assault on the senses. A dizzying network of black and white lines completely covered the walls, forming patterns that seemed to wiggle in the corner of her eyes.

Ami blinked once and tore her gaze away from the strangely hypnotic sight, focusing entirely on the imp instead. Her face fell when she realised that he was standing at the edge of a rectangular basin where strange rainbow patterns played across the dark waters.

The imp stopped tapping his foot, looked up, and grinned in her direction. The gem set in his bloody forehead was blazing a bright white, growing in intensity when the imp waved at her.

With a loud clinking noise, cracks spread over Ami's crystal ball as if something heavy had struck its smooth surface.

Startled, she let go of the sphere, which shattered into pieces a moment later. She hurriedly picked up a replacement, but it refused to show anything but darkness.

Last edited: Dec 25, 2020

The Gala Begins

Snyder's palms glowed a gentle white as he pointed them at Ami.

She shuddered, clenching her teeth as the wave of purifying magic washed over her, and slid backwards with her chair as far as the armoured hands on her shoulders would let her.

Cathy shoved her back towards the redheaded acolyte with a little more enthusiasm than was strictly necessary. "So now we have to worry about a Keeper with unlimited gold on top of everything else?" the swordswoman asked, her exasperated voice tinged with a hint of fear.

"No, we have to worry about the Unraveller of Mysteries potentially figuring out at some point how my gem furnaces work from the clues she has gathered," Ami replied, trying very hard to ignore the feeling of the holy magic working on her. "I don't think she has all that much to start with, and the dark god's realm doesn't really seem well suited for experim– eep!"

An unbearably white glow shone straight into her eyes.

Instinctively, she squeezed them shut and turned her face away even as she ducked and rolled sideways off her chair. "Snyder! Enough already! There's nothing wrong with me in the first place!"

The acolyte's robes swished as he took a startled step back. He raised his arm to scratch the back of his head as he watched her get off the floor. "How can you be sure? Your scanner wasn't good enough to catch that infiltrator in the first place now, was it?" he replied, the dark circles under his eyes explaining why he sounded grumpier than usual.

"I wasn't scanning for it!" she protested as she backed away from him, briefly glancing to her right to ensure she was staying outside of Cathy's grabbing range. "I certainly scanned myself very thoroughly for any abnormalities after the incident."

With a tired shrug, Snyder let himself drop into one of the armchairs. "Well, I admit I did not find anything either," he sighed. "Still, I would feel better if you underwent another few cleansing cycles just in case. Direct servants of the dark gods should not be underestimated."

"And this one was working with a Keeper too," Jered took the opportunity to interject. "Unless the Unraveller has her own dungeon with imps now, which is a scary thought." He was walking up and down at one end of the room, flipping through a notebook. "My informants haven't mentioned any rumours about Keeper minions with crystals stuck in their heads, but they might not have deemed it relevant information. I'll tell them to keep an eye out."

"You think the crystal retreated to a temple in the Underworld?" Cathy asked.

"Well, we found a broken-down Underworld portal in the cave the imp showed up in, and we know the Unraveller can temporarily restore those," Jered answered.

Ami shook her head. "I doubt the portal could have been restored quickly enough to react to my discovery of the intruder. Besides, I got a rough direction when that imp destroyed my crystal ball."

"You did?" Cathy asked, perking up.

"I was looking through my visor at the time," Ami confirmed with a small smile. "The hostile magic came from somewhere to the southwest."

"Where exactly?" Jered asked, looking around the room for a map.

Ami shrugged apologetically. "Sorry, that's about as precise as I can tell. The magic was barely detectable in the first place."

The wavy-haired man sighed. "Well, it's better than nothing, I suppose. Excludes most of the continent. I can check which Keepers are rumoured to be active in the region," he offered.

Jadeite, who had simply listened quietly so far, looked thoughtful. "Speaking of rumours, it would be unfortunate for your unassailable

image if news about you being laid low by a sneak attack spread," he said. "Did you do anything to keep that warlock who assisted you from blabbing?"

Ami suppressed a grimace. Of course she hadn't done anything bad to Harold. "He's smart enough to figure out that he was the only one around when it happened, so I would know exactly where such rumours started," she said. "He'll keep quiet. In any case, he's too busy trying to track down the crystal to make trouble."

"Wait, I thought it was gone or hiding inside of a dark temple, completely shielded from scrying?" Cathy asked.

"He's not using scrying. I don't think the part about there being more than one crystal in the memories I saw was false, so we are looking for other, similar crystals using sympathetic magic. The dwarfs did something similar to create a magical link to my computer and interfere with it," Ami explained.

"What are you using for the search?" Snyder asked, looking interested.

"I have made an accurate replica of the crystal using the dungeon heart and my recordings," she replied. "Aside from that, I also have the warlocks looking for individual parts of the gem furnace that was stolen."

Snyder nodded with a thoughtful expression. "That sounds reasonable. You should also take measures to prevent the opposite party from using them the same way. If they forged a sympathetic link to your furnaces, they could interfere with them."

"Good point." Ami decided that adding some individuality to the various furnaces wouldn't take much effort. Giving a few brushes and different buckets of paint to a bunch of imps and telling them to go wild would be more than enough. Unfortunately, it was likely that the thief had already taken similar precautions with the stolen parts.

"Any progress so far?" Cathy wanted to know.

Ami's face fell. "Less than I would have hoped. Getting the crystal to

look just right is difficult, since it has those moving patterns inside. I have recordings, so replicating them with glamour is possible, but the problem is that the targets need to show the same patterns at the time the searching spell is cast," she said.

Snyder frowned. "I see. Under those circumstances, you would have to repeatedly restart the sequence and recast the spell, hoping it matches the target the moment you do through sheer luck," the acolyte evaluated.

"Yes, and that's assuming that the movement of the patterns is repetitive," she replied. "I'm still looking for a better solution. Torian suggested searching for crystal-shaped forehead wounds instead."

Cathy sucked in a breath, the corners of her lips curving downwards in disgust.

Ami felt a little queasy too. "I can make mindless imps, that's how I feed the vampires after all, but his suggestion is still not very practical," she said. "Depth, angle and position of the wound would have to closely match, and that's assuming that the individual differences between organisms won't prevent a match from the start."

"You are searching by the shape of the crystal then, I assume?" Snyder said.

"Yes, but it's getting too many results," Ami sighed. "The shape of the Unraveller crystal matches that of natural quartz crystals, so the spell just uses up its power to return a flood of useless results."

"In other words, the thing is designed with in-built countermeasures to tracking magic," Jered summarised.

Ami had reached the same conclusion. It was reasonable to assume that the Unraveller had a greater breadth of knowledge about magic than she did. Therefore, the crystals were likely to have adequate protections against common means of magically affecting them.

Ami closed her eyes and pondered the problem. Ordinary approaches were useless. Did she have unique strengths she could

apply to the situation that the dark god wouldn't have considered? A moment later, her eyes opened, shining with determination. "Jadeite, I need a portal to space!"

After reassuring the dark general that no, she didn't mean for him to open a portal into the vacuum of space right that moment, Ami had quickly prepared what she needed. This amounted to bare room with a solid glass floor that served as the ceiling of an equally bare room below.

She nodded encouragingly at Jadeite, who disappeared from her side in a blur of vertical black lines and reappeared below the glass.

He extended his right arm before looking up through the transparent ceiling at the imitation Unraveller crystal glued to the topmost point of the rock dome above.

Ami felt her face flush. He could see up her skirt from down there, couldn't he? Due to her leotard, this wasn't a problem, but she still turned a little sideways so he could at most see her leg. Nevertheless, she almost felt disappointed when he looked away after a brief moment, having verified that he was pointing at the right spot.

A flat oval of darkness appeared in front of him as the portal opened, and his blond curls moved as wind picked up. Leftover dust from the imps digging out the room trickled down the walls and crawled towards the growing gateway.

Jadeite stuck around until the portal was as tall as he was, visibly leaning back to avoid the suction pulling him in. The moment the magical gate stabilized, he teleported away.

"Thanks," Ami said as he reappeared near her, but she kept watching the room below.

The whooshing noise died down when the last of the air below disappeared into space. The surrounding rock creaked faintly from the shift in pressure, but nothing visibly moved and the thick glass

floor remained solid as well.

Ami summoned her visor and inspected the walls. Good, nothing was shifting or vibrating. She needed the room to be at rest to take accurate measurements.

Straight below her, the planet was partially visible through the portal. Clouds covered the area Ami was most interested in, but that wasn't a hindrance for her plan. At this point, she was simply measuring the distance to the ground.

Satisfied, she entered the numbers into her palmtop and turned her attention to the table. She needed a map appropriately scaled to the portal's elevation, and so she had her computer project an appropriate shape onto her visor. Now she simply traced what she was seeing with her Keeper powers, quickly engraving the map into the glass floor.

The replica on the ceiling wasn't made of crystal at all; it was solid steel instead. All it had in common with Ami's quarry was its shape.

She had picked steel because it was sturdy, as it needed to survive acting as the anchor for a sympathetic search spell with far more power than usual. Enough power that she could form links to all those natural quartz crystals in the target region before running out. Other Keepers might be able to manage it too with enough ritual preparation, but they couldn't simply concentrate on the spell, pick their target, and then let the mana flow.

As she just did.

Faint light gathered at the bottommost tip of the fake crystal and shot straight down, passing through the map etched onto the glass floor on its way through the portal. Like a spotlight shining out of the replica, it expanded the farther away it got from its point of origin, forming a cone that was wide enough to fill the entire portal where it passed through.

The individual threads that formed the light cone were only visible with much closer inspection. Each one connected the replica with exactly one crystal shaped just like it. Seen together, they looked

like one single solid shape.

Ami cast a second spell, infusing the map with mana. Little glowing dots appeared where the threads passed through its surface. Finally, she shifted the threads into invisibility until only the dots remained.

It looked like someone had spilled glowing sand onto her map.

Magnified by Ami's visor, she could see the individual grains that each represented the location of a crystal. There wasn't much empty space between them, and some even overlapped, but her approach had worked. If she had tried this from a vantage point closer to the ground, more of the threads would have been overlapping each other, and she wouldn't have been able to tell them apart. She smiled in satisfaction at having bypassed another layer of the Unraveller's security.

With quiet footsteps, Jadeite moved to her side and looked at the map. "You seem pleased."

Her smile faded a little. "Yes, but now comes the most time-consuming part."

"Finding the correct targets in that mess?"

"No, that's easy, I only have to pick the few that move," she answered. At least it was an easy task for her. Anyone without her visor and computer would have to get creative to spot or even observe the minuscule movements of a select few dots among the masses. Sure, some of them were probably false positives, like natural crystals getting swept along inside of rivers, but her real targets should be among the dots she had identified.

Jadeite blinked in surprise. "Then the hard part is…?"

With a wave of her hand, a desk and a chair dropped out of thin air and landed before her with a clatter. She picked up a pen. "Copying down all of the suspicious coordinates so my warlocks can investigate them."

The airship hovered hundreds of meters above the ground, facing a terrace the size of a basketball court carved directly into the vertical cliff face. The vessel's propellers hummed, hard at work to keep the howling winds from pushing it out of position. With a clank, the cabin split along a horizontal, gilded seam and opened like a giant maw.

The small groups of people assembled around various standing tables stood frozen and watched the widening gap with pale faces and clenched jaws. Maids and valets in red-jacketed uniforms stood out in the open, tablets threatening to slip from their shaking hands.

Ami's mouth felt dry as she faced the silent crowd. Head held high? Check. Breathing even? Check. Facial muscles relaxed? Check. Hands not clasped in front of herself, although she dearly wanted to? Check. Reassured that she had successfully avoided timid body language so far, she calmed down fractionally. She was slowly getting more used to being the centre of attention, but, well, when she was talking to her employees, then the audience was friendly.

The looks she was receiving from the elaborately dressed courtiers and their bodyguards were anything but.

She supposed she could at least count herself lucky that the serving staff avoided meeting her gaze at all.

With a flex of her Keeper powers, the ice underneath her feet rose from the floor, lifting her up. It had been sculpted into the shape of a real snowflake, magnified enough to carry her as well as the six bodyguards her role demanded. They were ice golems, formed up in a semi-circle behind her and covered from head to toe in armour that was mostly ornamental, but disguised their true nature.

A ripple went through the crowd as the intricate, glittering platform emerged from the open cabin and drifted towards the terrace.

Ami wasn't going slowly for their benefit. She was more concerned about keeping her balance than about giving people time to move away or about dragging out the moment. Right now, she was envying her golems who didn't have to worry about high heels or the wind turning her voluminous, bell-shaped dress into a sail.

Her fingers moved down to the silky fabric whipping around her legs like a flag. The motion, while intended to keep the dress down, also allowed her to confirm that the wiry, rune-shaped keystones sewed into its layers were still present. Losing them and setting the entire place on fire when Nailcastle's wards combusted around her would be even more of a faux-pas than stumbling.

Although it would easily convince everyone that she didn't really want to be here.

The snowflake touched down on the polished sandstone floor with a clinking noise. A well-timed spell shattered it into a mist of glittering ice particles that billowed up around Ami.

One of the servants, a well-groomed dwarf whose jacket had epaulettes and an extra helping of golden chains, gaped at the towering misty column dissipating into the wind, his gaze focused on the two burning red eyes shining from within. As if waking from a daze, the herald closed his mouth with an audible click. His chest swelled as he sucked in a large amount of air. "Her Imperial Majesty, Empress Mercury of the Avatar Islands!" he bellowed.

The echoes of his proclamation faded away at the same time as the last wisps of icy mist drifted over the terrace's railing. His voice reminded the people that, yes, there was now a Keeper among them, but that the situation was under control and that formalities were still being observed.

People slowly started moving and talking to each other in hushed voices again. From what Ami could overhear, most were arguing about whether or not they would have to approach her.

Loud footsteps came from the arched doorway that led deeper into the fortress, and people relaxed as they recognised the approaching figure in jewel-encrusted ceremonial armour.

Duke Libasheshtan approached with a steady, dignified stride, his ducal crown gleaming on his brow and his purple mantle waving behind him. As the host, he was in charge of welcoming important new arrivals. Since Ami had bypassed the hero gate and arrived directly at the reception area, he had missed her entrance.

Similar to the other guests, Ami felt a bit relieved upon seeing him and was more than willing to wait and let him take the lead. Her own role during the gala required little more than her presence, but she was still worried that she would say or do something that people would take the wrong way. Even being too friendly with someone could land that person in trouble.

Admittedly, it didn't look as if she would have to worry too much about that. So far, people were at best directing strained, fake smiles her way if she looked at them for too long. If she wanted conversation, she would have to initiate it. The thought prompted her to search for familiar faces among the sea of pinched, wary expressions.

She spotted the fairy sisters almost instantly. With their glitter, wings, and colourful hair, they would have been unmissable even without their revealing uniforms sticking out like a sore thumb among the fully covered crowd.

The next attention-grabbing figure she recognised was a large human with an impressive moustache. Baron Leopold was surrounded by a group of dwarfs fawning over his armour, whom he ignored in favour of watching her over their heads.

Ami's eyebrows creep upwards. She hadn't expected to see the human noble here, but in hindsight, his presence wasn't too surprising. The dwarfs wouldn't have rewarded him with a suit of adamantine plate if he wasn't a staunch and valued ally.

"Wait, those winged girls are not hers?" a puzzled voice whispered, its nervous tone drawing Ami's attention. She had perceived the whisper with her Keeper senses, which, on foreign territory, meant that the speaker was near one of her employees.

Without moving her head, Ami focused her attention on Jered. Dressed in a colourful outfit that included a stiff collar and a surprising amount of frills along the sides of his pants, he fit right in with the other high-ranking dwarfs. Arm in arm with Umbra, whose human glamour was almost unnecessary underneath the many layers of blue and black velvet and veils, he was staying near the corner of the terrace farthest from its edge.

The clean-shaved human who had whispered was one of the twelve Silver Hawks mercenaries Jered had brought as bodyguards, which was pushing the limits of politeness. After all, it implied that he didn't trust the Duke to keep his guests safe. Of course, his real safety net was Umbra, who would teleport him out at the first sign of trouble.

Jered raised an eyebrow and leaned in closer to the speaker. An amused smile played around his lips as he replied in a hushed voice, "You had better not let Ambassador Camilla from the Shining Concord Empire hear that you mistook her bodyguards for Keeper minions." He pointed out the blonde fairy wearing a dress similar in style to Ami's, aside from lacking the royal purple and having an open back to accommodate her wings.

To be fair, Ami could hardly fault the man for making that mistake. Unfortunately, the fairies had been unimpressed by her warning that their traditional uniform, while sensibly lightweight and streamlined for fliers who kept themselves warm with magic and had to swim occasionally, might not be the ideal attire for this event. Glancing over at the sisters in question, she noticed that Tilia, Roselle, and Melissa were standing close together and glaring at the group of mercenaries.

Another of Jered's hirelings, who had been keeping a vigilant eye on Ami, turned his head towards his boss in alarm. "S-Seriously?"

Jered nodded slowly, and the man's face, which was marred by razor cuts, went bright red, and his shoulders slumped. "Shit, I totally embarrassed myself there."

A female voice came from the face-concealing helmet of the smaller figure to the right. "Godsdammit, Jack! And here I was wondering why the dwarfs were glaring more at us than at *her*. She made a concealed hand gesture in Ami's direction.

Yet another mercenary in lighter armour and with a thin moustache nodded. "Yes, I was finding that odd, too," he said in a low, cultured tone. "My father has a close enough relationship with some of them that they must have recognised me, and they are usually impeccably polite when dealing with nobility."

The blushing mercenary groaned.

Jered snorted. "In your party member's defence, it's not his actions that they are have an issue with, Prince Norton. They are actually more annoyed by your presence here."

"Excuse me?"

"You must have some idea of how unpalatable this entire regency arrangement is to them," Jered elaborated. "With noble witnesses from foreign realms, it becomes considerably harder to, let's say, interpret its terms loosely when they become inconvenient."

The prince looked thoughtful. "I had not considered that. Should I leave? I obviously won't expect pay for-"

Jered interrupted him with a short laugh. "Denied. That would let all my effort go to waste. It's neither simple nor cheap to find a bunch of noble scions so far down the line of succession that they work for hire."

The woman in the suit of full plate whirled to face him. "You! You bastard!" She snarled. "You are working for *her*!" Her face remained invisible under her helmet, but her clenching fists and aggressive posture left no doubt about her feelings.

With a soundless, gliding motion, Umbra advanced half a step and tilted her head in Ami's direction.

Ami, while not too enthused about Jered's gloating, took the cue and turned towards the group of mercenaries.

Her gaze had the same effect as dumping a bucket of ice water over the angry adventurers closing in on her employee. The circle widened as they backed off, swallowing and lowering their heads. Some even tried shuffling sideways until their wavy-haired employer was between her and them.

She stopped paying attention to the situation when Duke Libasheshtan finally finished his walk to her location.

He welcomed her with a bow deep enough that the six neat braids of

his black beard dangled freely in the air. "Welcome, your Imperial Majesty. I hope you had a pleasant journey."

Her return bow was shallower, in accordance with her higher title. "Duke Libasheshtan," she greeted him, "I did indeed enjoy the view."

It was even true. Being above ground after spending so much time underground felt very pleasant, and the forested mountainsides passing by on both sides of her airship had presented her with some spectacular panoramas. She hadn't indulged too much, as she could work with her dungeon remotely, but she had certainly been paying attention to Nailcastle as the rocky column grew larger and larger in the distance. The arrangement of balconies and terraces jutting out of its near-vertical cliffs, interspersed with occasional trees and vines, reminded her of artful rock gardens.

"Very good, ma'am" the Duke replied stiffly. "Let us drink to that." He handed her an alcoholic beverage from one of the standing tables as part of the formal dwarven greeting.

To her, it felt a little odd, but none of the many guests watching them both batted an eye at the proceedings.

She accepted the offered drink, which didn't come in the flutelike glass she had expected. Instead, a weighty stein decorated with intricate geometrical patterns occupied her hands. Overlapping squares that represented salt crystals, if she didn't miss her guess. Admittedly, at this altitude it made some sense to use furniture and tableware too heavy to be easily blown away.

She took a sip of the mushroom-based wine, and immediately regretted that her glamour included functional taste buds. The flavour wasn't bad enough to make her grimace, but it was definitely an acquired taste. Perhaps the dwarfs were aware of this, as the stein certainly contained enough wine to make a serious attempt at acquiring it.

Duke Libasheshtan lowered his own stein with a pleased expression. "I'm glad you had a smooth journey, ma'am," he said. He bowed again and took a step away from her. "Please excuse me, but duty calls." While turning towards the entrance, he stopped

briefly when facing the orchestra, and gave a hand signal.

Twelve dwarfs seated on two long benches started playing a slow tune on various percussive and stringed instruments.

The Duke glanced back at Ami a final time. "Please enjoy mingling with the other guests, your Imperial Majesty."

Clearly alarmed by his parting words, the closest guests turned away or moved a little faster when Ami's gaze moved in their direction.

A shadow briefly fell over terrace, prompting a small hitch in the music. People looked up with nervous expressions as they spotted Ami's airship circling the spire at some distance like a shark. To someone who wasn't aware how much volume the vessel dedicated to lifting gas, it would certainly look massive and menacing.

While looking up, Ami noticed that there was a roof that could be lowered like a drawbridge over the terrace in case of inclement weather. Deciding to give the other guests some time to acclimatise to her presence, she remained in place and admired her surroundings. Especially the highest parts of the fortress, where the rock spire tapered to a point, bristled with an impressive amount of orchards layered not unlike rice paddies.

When it became clear that she wasn't going to immediately seek out people to corrupt, the attention on her slowly died down to cautious glances, and conversations picked up again.

Ami decided that she had waited long enough, put down her stein, and stepped away from it. She gracefully pretended to not notice a shaking maidservant almost tripping when she got close enough to sense that Ami's golem guards had no bones.

She acknowledged Jered with a nod and ordered all but two of her golems to remain behind as she directed her steps toward Camilla. Out of everyone around here, the fairy ambassador was probably the least reluctant to chat with Ami, which would demonstrate to the others that she wouldn't hurt them for trying to talk to her.

The blonde fairy in question was near a dwarf who looked like a monk, albeit a monk who had decided that poverty and abstinence were for other people. The rope constraining his rotund belly glittered with threads of gold, his robe depicted a colourful landscape, and the staff he was leaning on could have doubled as a king's sceptre.

Ami recognised him from images as Roderser, the designated representative King Ral had sent to attend in his place.

While physically close to him, Camilla wasn't paying him any attention right now. She was too busy backing away from a dwarf with an amicable expression who was talking loudly while he intruded into her personal space.

"… wouldn't you agree, Ambassador?" the pushy dwarf said. He was wearing a colourful ensemble with purely decorative pieces of armour, but most of it was covered by a long tabard with the goat-headed sigil of Sirith Anlur.

Camilla, visibly uncomfortable, glanced over at Roderser for a moment. "Ah, Ambassador Bagozkal, I believe it would be presumptuous of me to comment on internal affairs of your realm with only superficial knowledge," the blonde said after a moment of awkward silence. Her gaze furtively darted towards her oldest sister Dandel, who was standing guard nearby and carefully failed to make eye contact, her expression serene.

"Oh, you should find the situation familiar to your own or the good Duke's, I'm sure even Roderser must agree," the dwarf from Sirith Anlur said. It earned him a look of barely-concealed loathing from the monk-like diplomat, which he completely ignored in order to continue, "I would be more than happy to elaborate on the details during," he glanced back over his shoulder, perhaps noticing the ambient conversation volume lowering as Ami approached, "during… excuse me please something really urgent came up I must go!"

Ambassador Bagozkal's speedy departure left Camilla blinking in relieved confusion until she noticed Ami approaching. At that point, she just barely managed to disguise a brief laugh as a cough.

Roderser glanced at Ami, frowned, looked back at the departing Ambassador Bagozkal, and when he turned back to the approaching Keeper, his face had settled in an expression that looked, on average, pleased.

At that point, baron Leopold stepped in front of the dwarven representative like a human roadblock, impeding Ami's path.

Ami hesitated, thrown a little off-script by the fact that he was another noble guest, not a bodyguard. Was this him being rude and running interference, or did he simply want to talk to her? She wasn't even close enough yet for the gesture to be unambiguously directed at her. If this was intended to be a subtle snub, it was a plausibly deniable one. Should she be confrontational about this for her act? She wished Duke Libasheshtan was around to help sort things out.

She looked over at the wide doorway, trying to see if he was close enough to smooth things over. Unfortunately, he was at the other end of a long hallway lined with columns and statues, standing near a hero gate carved into the wall. Bright white light spilled from the portal's back wall, which turned into a featureless white rectangle.

A tall, wide-shouldered silhouette stepped out of the pane of white, and golden reflections spilled out into the hallway.

"Lord Avatar! Welcome to Nailcastle!" the Duke's enthusiastic greeting drew attention to the tall, armoured figure who had just appeared from the hero gate.

Word of the Avatar's arrival spread within moments, and a tide of guests swept out of the reception area and into the hallway, towards the perceived safety of his proximity. They did try to look nonchalant about it – of course they weren't fleeing, they were merely eager to meet the esteemed Lord Avatar! However, the way the crowd streamed around Ami at a distance revealed its true intentions.

The herald, whose job it was to announce newcomers as soon as they stepped out onto the terrace, was wringing his hands as he frowned at the crowd now congesting the hallway.

Ami shot him a sympathetic look. Having everyone ignore protocol

and preventing him from announcing one of the most important guests had to be awkward.

Noticing her attention, the dwarf paled and looked ready to run off too.

Smile turning brittle, she looked in Jered's direction instead. By now, the terrace was practically empty aside from the nervous staff and her own small delegation. Even Jered's mercenaries had abandoned him.

She exchanged a questioning look with the wavy-haired man, who just shrugged and pointed in the direction of the entrance, where the guests were slowly being pushed back out onto the terrace.

The noise level rose as people loudly vied for the Avatar's attention. Despite the press of bodies, the dwarfs somehow managed to show proper respect and deference by clearing a path for him and Duke Libasheshtan.

The Avatar, however, was currently listening to the tall elf fortunate enough to have gotten hold of the spot to his left. Unlike the dark elves Ami was familiar with, the androgynous figure had both a deep tan and not only long, flowing hair, but also a matching blond beard.

The elf, who was wearing some kind of polished breastplate made of artfully interwoven twigs, was gesticulating widely even as he leaned in closer to the Avatar with a pleading expression.

Ami strained to hear what they were talking about, but couldn't listen in due to the noisy crowd. Her Keeper senses didn't work on foreign territory unless she had an employee nearby, and both Jered and Umbra hadn't moved from their spot yet. She wished she could have smuggled in some rats inside her golems, but dwarven senses made that plan unfeasible.

"My lip reading isn't great, but I'm getting that he's requesting a visit to his homeland due to increasing Keeper pressure," Jered sent her a mental message. *"Also, people might get nervous if you keep frowning that hard in the Avatar's direction."*

Ami froze and noticed that, yes, she was staring and yes, people were starting to notice. With a faint blush, she turned aside and told one of her disguised golems to fetch her a snack. The Duke could fill her in on the details later.

Meanwhile, a dwarven courtier had somehow managed to replace the elf at the Avatar's side. Lacking the height of the pointy-eared man, he couldn't stop others from addressing the Avatar straight over his head. Unable to get a word in, his frustration was visibly rising.

The fairy sisters had to be feeling the same way. In a scramble with dwarfs, they were physically at a disadvantage, and occasional glimpses of bare skin in the crowd revealed that they were being pushed farther and farther away from the golden-armoured man.

The pressure let up only when he finally stepped out of the hallway and people spilled back out onto the terrace, dispersing a little. The poor herald's redundant announcement of the Avatar's presence went completely ignored as the group slowly rotated around him.

Amadeus endured the attention with remarkable patience, returning smiles and exchanging brief sentences with the people trying to engage him in conversation. After a few minutes though, he raised his hand. "A moment of quiet, please," his voice echoed out.

Within a few breaths, the shouts and clamouring died down, and even the orchestra stopped playing.

"Thank you." He lowered his hand and turned to the dwarf to his right. "Duke Libashestan. As our gracious host, you must be keeping track of everyone who has arrived so far."

"Indeed, Lord Avatar," the Duke replied, nodding in confirmation.

The Avatar straightened to his full height and turned one full circle, his gaze sweeping over everyone assembled. "Correct me if I am wrong, but it appears to me that all the important guests have already arrived?"

"We are not missing anyone above the rank of court scribe, Lord

Avatar," the Duke said.

"Good. In that case, I request that we proceed with the ceremony straight away," Amadeus said.

A few surprised gasps came from the guests.

"I realise that the request may appear rude, but my duties are many, and strictly adhering to protocol is most assuredly *not* the most beneficial use of my time," the Avatar continued.

A murmur went through the crowd. Some dwarfs looked scandalised, but nobody seemed ready to argue with the Avatar that slaying monsters was less important than the gala's timetable. A few glanced over at Ami with thoughtful and satisfied looks, interpreting his words as a faint insult aimed at her.

Duke Libasheshtan drew in a deep breath. "That is, well, I am sure nobody would find fault with accommodating you, Lord Avatar, unless perhaps her Imperial Majesty disagrees?" He turned towards Ami expectantly.

People held their breaths as they awaited the dark empress' reaction.

Put on the spot, Ami remained quiet for a tense few seconds. The faster this awkwardness was over the better, in her opinion, but she was supposed to sell the idea that she was being coerced into this. "I suppose it would be rather petty of me if I dragged things out," she said with a faint smile, as if she was considering doing just that. "Fine, go ahead."

"Thank you for your cooperation, your Imperial Majesty," the Avatar replied in a tone so dry it made a mockery out of his polite words.

"Very well," the Duke called over several servants, who darted off to convey his orders.

A loud fanfare preceded the herald's next proclamation. "Esteemed Majesties, Lords, and honoured guests, your attention please! By personal request of his Exalted Lordship the Avatar and with agreement from her Imperial Majesty, Empress Mercury, his Grace,

Duke Libasheshtan, will formally be accepting the regency over the realm of her Imperial Majesty slightly ahead of schedule! Please assemble at your assigned positions around the podium!"

Two servants were unrolling a red carpet down the three stairs that led up to the raised platform he had indicated, and dwarven soldiers in parade armour arrived, walking in formation as the orchestra started playing a solemn march.

On Ami's cue, her own guards joined the forming honour guard, their darker-coloured full plate contrasting with the shining silver tones of the dwarven armour.

The Duke inclined his head towards her in an invitation, and she joined him at the far edge of the red carpet.

She took the lead, walking one step ahead of him through the honour guard due to her higher rank. Now that the ceremony proper had started, she was feeling calmer than before despite the many eyes tracking her every move. For this part, everything was planned and rehearsed, so she knew exactly what to expect. It also helped that she mostly just had to sit on her throne and look regal while the Duke handled most of the talking.

He walked up to the pedestal and began his speech with a long-winded introduction about how this occasion was grounds for celebration as it provided ample opportunities to redress an unfortunate situation.

Ami had heard the speech so many times during the rehearsals that she wasn't paying attention any more. Instead, she watched the audience as the Duke went on about responsibility, duty, and proper upbringing.

The faces looking up at her remained impassive, though some twitching mouth corners and subtly arching eyebrows suggested that people were contemplating Duke Libasheshtan's words with a healthy amount of scepticism.

She couldn't really blame them when she agreed that the idea of handling a Keeper with pedagogy was, well, hopelessly optimistic at

best. Thinking of Keeper–related issues, she had some time to check up on her dungeon, because the Duke would be talking at length about tradition and ancestors. Carefully keeping her eyes looking straight ahead, she moved her Keeper sight back to Salthalls, where her warlocks were working with crystal balls.

The huge list with potential Unraveller crystal locations pinned to the wall now had all but two entries crossed out. Her warlocks had split into two groups, each of which was working on putting together a small-scale model of a sprawling dungeon. With how little they had mapped out so far, they would be busy scrying for some time yet.

If they found any traces of gem furnace experimentation, then Ami would have to deal with those complexes.

Certain familiar parts of the Duke's speech caught Ami's attention before she could really get deeply into strategising. The next part required her participation.

The dwarf turned towards her with a stern look, his purple cape billowing. "Your Imperial Majesty, I hereby accept the duty of wielding the imperial authority and governing your realm in your name. As your regent and guardian, I shall ensure the well-being of yourself and your subjects until you reach the age of majority."

Ami stayed silent for a moment as if she was having second thoughts. Finally, she rose from her throne and nodded once. "I, Empress Mercury of the Avatar Islands, thank you for your service to my realm." That the service wasn't to herself was the important part here.

"I, Avatar Amadeus, witness and confirm Duke Libasheshtan's appointment to the position of Regent," the Avatar said, his eyes shining with faint light. "Congratulations, Regent Libasheshtan."

Following his example, the audience offered reluctant applause and congratulations too. The clapping from Sirith Anlur's representative was particularly slow and sarcastic. He also broke protocol as he failed to get in line to offer personal congratulations to the Duke. Instead, he directly approached the Avatar with a drink.

Of all the glares directed at the shameless dwarf, those of the fairies were the fiercest as they politely waited in line. When they finally got close to the Avatar too, Roderser had already joined the conversation.

"…preposterous! The situation is completely different! He is not working *for* a Keeper, but in a position of authority over one! Do not be taken in by his honeyed words, Lord Avatar," the bald dwarf said, frowning all the time. "They have learned nothing! Ambassador Camilla, isn't it true that the dark empress commissioned some goods from Sirith Anlur?" He turned his head so suddenly in the blonde's direction that he startled her.

"Wha- yes, but-"

"And that's willingly and knowingly serving a Keeper!" Roderser said, not letting Camilla finish her sentence.

"You have some gall twisting a simple business transaction into something supporting your continuing agenda of discrimination!" Ambassador Bagozkal growled. "Ambassador Camilla, your own trade experiences support my view?"

Camilla perked up. "Actually, I have a different issue to discuss with the Lord Avatar-"

"Which I'm sure you'll be able to do to your full satisfaction during the feast," Bagozkal interrupted again, drawing a frown from both the fairy and Roderser. "To stay on topic-"

"No." This time it was Amadeus who interrupted, reddish eyebrows narrowed in irritation. "Unfortunately, I cannot spare the time to stay for the feast."

His careless statement, while intended to support Camilla, neglected to take the audience into account. The guests who hadn't had the opportunity to talk to him yet overheard that he would be leaving soon, the crowd surged, and the poor fairy was swept away in the stream of bodies despite her vocal protests.

"All right, enough is enough!" Anise declared. The ruby-eyed fairy

drew some curious looks as she jumped high into the air and fluttered her wings to escape from the bodies pressing against each other.

Ami, still sitting on her throne and neither inclined nor expected to mingle, was a little surprised when the fairy landed nearby and stomped in her direction.

Anise leaned down and whispered, "You told us we could plead our case to the Avatar, so come along and help us out!" With that, she grabbed Ami by the wrist and tugged.

A full stein shattered on the ground, and people stared wide-eyed. Someone stuttered "Sh-shameless!" and a few dwarfs tried to duck behind the standing tables for cover. One of the drummers missed a beat.

Ami, for her part, had already let herself be dragged along for a few steps before she really started thinking about how this might affect her image. Empress meekly following a girl who's half-naked by dwarven standards? She felt her ears burn. Oh well. In the end, she *did* owe the fairies a favour, and she would have to start interacting more with people at some point.

Not that it looked as if she would get to do so; Anise's plan to use her as sycophant repellent was working very well. The servants watching her move towards the Avatar fled first, alerting the guests at the rim of the crowd. Their departure in turn alerted the guests deeper in, causing a chain reaction that parted the sea of bodies before her.

Ambassador Bagozkal yelped when he noticed how close she was all of a sudden and ran without a thought for propriety, leaving Camilla, the Avatar, Roderser, and Baron Leopold to form a small, isolated group of their own.

Again, the moustached baron interposed himself between Ami and Roderser, glowering down at her. "Lord Avatar? Why don't you just deal with that Keeper brat right now? I mean, she's right here."

Ami shot him an incredulous look, wondering if he had a death wish.

No, with the way he was smirking now he had to be testing her? She quickly closed her mouth.

"Trying would be pointless," Amadeus replied with a frown. "That's not her real body."

"Huh. You are the Avatar. I'm sure you have some way around that." He paused, considering. "If it takes some time to deploy, I can hold her off for a little."

The Avatar buried his face in his palm, incidentally flashing a ring on his finger. "Baron Leopold, why must you do this every time? Besides, you know I am unable to bring my full power to bear like this."

The adamantine-armored figure slumped and let out a long sigh. "How unfortunate." A moment later, he perked up again and grinned at Ami. "So, Empress, I hear you have a new reaper. Think it's up for a fight?"

Ami found herself actually taking a step back. She was far from the only one staring at the baron with a wary expression, though the Avatar only looked exasperated. "Well, um, Rabixtrel is always ready to battle, but he probably wouldn't want to make the journey," she finally replied.

"Lord Avatar!" Camilla said, jumping at the opportunity offered by the awkward silence. "My sisters and I were caught in the magical accident that recently befell Salthalls. This leaves us in a shaky position as far as the laws of the Shining Concord Empire are concerned. Could you please help us convince our superiors that we are still fit for our duties?"

It wasn't the most diplomatic request that the Avatar had ever received, but he thought about it for a moment. "Provided that is, in fact, the case, I'm inclined to assist you. However, this is neither the time nor place for the thorough examination required. I will instruct my seneschal to schedule a proper meeting and contact you."

"Thank you very much, Lord Avatar!" Camilla said, bowing deeply.

"We'll be eternally grateful," her sisters chimed in, bowing too.

The dinner gong rang loudly, which answered Ami's question about where Duke Libasheshtan had disappeared to during all this.

"And that is my cue to bid you farewell, your Imperial Majesty, your Excellencies, Lords and Ladies," Amadeus said. Using Ami's presence as a dam that held back the tide of his admirers, he strode towards the hero gate at a fast pace.

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